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ELSTER'S FOLLY BY MRS. HENRY WOOD.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

COLLECTION

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IN

ELSTER'S FOLLY.

A NOVEL.

BY

MRS. HENRY WOOD,

AUTHOR OF "EAST LYNNE," "ST. MARTIN'S EVE," ETC.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1866.

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LETTERS FOR

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OF

MRS. J. J. J. J.

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ELSTER'S FOLLY.

CHAPTER I.

A Secret Care.

FROM that hour Lord Hartledon was a changed man. He went about as one who has some awful fear upon him, starting at shadows. That his manner was inexplicable, even allowing that he had some great crime on his conscience, a looker-on had not failed to observe. He was very tender with his wife; far more so than he had been at all; anxious, as it seemed, to indulge her every fancy, to gratify her every whim. But when it came to going into society with her, then he hesitated; he would and he wouldn't, putting Maude in mind of his old vacillation, which indeed had seemed to have been laid aside for ever. It was as if he did not seem to know what to do; what he ought to do; his own wish or inclination appeared to have no part in it.

"Why *won't* you go with me?" she said to him in temper, one day that he had retracted his assent at the last moment. "Is it that you care so much for Anne Ashton, you don't care to be seen with me?"

"O, Maude! — care for Anne Ashton! If you knew how little she is in my thoughts now! When by chance I do think of her, it is to be thankful I

did not marry her," he added, in a tone of self-communing.

Maude laughed a light laugh. "This movement of theirs is putting you out of conceit of your old love, is it, Val?"

"What movement?" he rejoined; and he would not have asked the question but that his thoughts had gone wool-gathering.

"You are dreaming, Val. The action."

"Ah, yes, to be sure."

"Have you heard yet what damages they claim?"

He shook his head. "You promised not to speak of this, Maude; even to me."

"Who is to help speaking of it, when you allow it to take your ease away? I never saw any one so changed in my life as you are. I wish the thing was over and done with, though it left you a few thousands pounds the poorer. *Will* you go with me to this dinner to-day? I am sick of appearing alone and making excuses for you."

"I wish I knew what was best to do — what my course ought to be!" thought the earl within his conscience. "I can't *bear* for her to be seen with me; when I face people with her on my arm, it seems as if they knew what sort of a man she, in her unconsciousness, is leaning upon."

"I'll go with you to-day, Maude, as you press it. I was to have seen Mr. Carr, but I can send down to him."

"Then dress yourself, and don't be five minutes over it: it is time we went."

She heard him despatch a footman to the Temple with a message that he should not be at Mr. Carr's

chambers that evening; and she lay back in her chair, waiting for him in her dinner-dress of black and white. They were in mourning still for the late earl. Lord Hartledon did not put it off, and Maude had loved him too well to grumble at the delay.

She had grown tolerant in regard to the intimacy with Mr. Carr. That her husband should escape as soon and as favourably out of the dilemma in which he was plunged, she naturally wished; that he should require legal advice and assistance to accomplish it, was only reasonable, and therefore she winked, so to say, at the visits of Mr. Carr. She had even gone the length one evening of sending some tea in for them when he and Val were closeted together.

But still Lady Hartledon was not quite prepared to find Mr. Carr at their house when they returned. She and Lord Hartledon went forth to the dinner; the latter comporting himself more as though his wits were in some far-off hemisphere, rather than in this, so absent-minded was he; from the dinner they proceeded to another place or two; and on getting home, towards one in the morning, there was the barrister.

"Mr. Carr is waiting to see you, my lord," said Hedges, meeting them in the passage. "He is in the dining-room."

"Mr. Carr! Now!"

The light from the hall-lamp shone full on the earl's face as he spoke. He had been momentarily forgetting care; had been speaking gaily to his wife as they entered. She saw the change that came over it; the look of fear, of apprehension, that replaced its smile. He went into the dining-room, and she followed him.

"Why, Carr!" he exclaimed. "Is it you?"

Mr. Carr, bowing to the countess, made a joke of the matter. "As I had waited so long, I thought I'd wait the rest, Hartledon; as good be hung for a sheep as a lamb, you know, and I have no wife sitting up at home."

"You got my message?"

"Yes, and that brought me here. I wanted just to say a word to you, as I am going out of town to-morrow."

"What will you take?"

"Nothing at all. Hedges has been making me some munificently hospitable offers, but I declined them. I never take any thing after my dinner, save a cup of tea, or so, as you may remember, keeping a clear head for work in the morning."

There was a slight pause. Lady Hartledon saw of course that she was *de trop* in the conference; that Mr. Carr would not speak his "word" while she was present. She had never understood why the matter should be kept apart from her; and in her heart resented it.

"You won't say to my husband before me what you have come to say, Mr. Carr."

It was strictly the truth, but the abrupt manner of bringing it home to him took away momentarily Mr. Carr's power of repartee, although he was apt enough at it in general, as became a special pleader.

"You have had news from the Ashtons; that is, of their cause, and you have come to tell it. I don't see why you and Lord Hartledon should be so cautious to keep every thing from me."

There was an eager look on Lord Hartledon's face as he stood behind his wife. It was directed to Mr. Carr, and said as plainly as look can say, "Don't un-

deceive her; keep up the delusion." But Thomas Carr was not so apt at keeping up delusions at the expense of truth, and he only smiled at the countess.

"How much damages are they suing for?"

"O," said Mr. Carr, with a laugh, and ready enough now, "ten thousand pounds will cover it."

"Ten thousand pounds!" she echoed, her ear catching at the sum. "I hope they have a conscience! Of course they'll not get the half. In this sort of action — Breach of Promise — parties never get so much as they ask for, do they?"

"Not often."

She laughed a little as she quitted the room. In good manners she could not remain longer, and it never occurred to her to suspect that any graver matter was in question than this action.

"Now, Carr?" began Lord Hartledon, seating himself near the table as he closed the door after her, and speaking in a low tone.

"I got this letter by the afternoon mail," said Mr. Carr, taking one from the safe enclosure of his pocket-book. "It is satisfactory, so far as it goes."

"I call it very satisfactory," returned the earl, glancing through it. "I thought he'd listen to reason. What is done cannot be undone, and exposure will answer no end whatever. I wrote him an urgent letter the other day, begging him to be silent for Maude's sake. Were I to expiate the past with my life, it could not undo it; if he brought me to the bar of my country to plead guilty, or not guilty the past would remain the past."

"And I put the matter to him in my letter somewhat in the same light, though in a more business-like

point of view," returned Mr. Carr. "There was no entreaty in mine. I left compassion, whether for you or for others, out of the argument; and said to him, what will you gain by exposure, and how will you reconcile it to your conscience to inflict on innocent persons the torture that such exposure must bring?"

"Carr, I shall breathe freely now," said the earl with a sigh of relief. "If that man gives his word not to stir in the matter, not to take proceedings against me, in short to bury what he knows in secrecy and silence, as he has hitherto buried it, it will be all I can hope."

Mr. Carr lifted his eyebrows.

"I perceive what you think: that the fact remains. Carr, I know it as well as you; I know that *nothing* can alter it. Don't you see that the remorse is ever present to me? driving me mad? killing me with its pain?"

"Do you know what I should be tempted to do, were the case mine?" rejoined Mr. Carr.

"Well?"

"Tell my wife."

"Carr!"

"I almost think I should; I am not quite sure. Should the shock ever come upon her—"

"But I trust it never will come upon her," interrupted the earl, his face hot.

"Well, it's a delicate point to argue," acknowledged Mr. Carr, "and I cannot hope to bring you into my way of looking at it. Had you married Miss Ashton, it appears to me that you would have had no resource but to tell: the very fact of being tied to you would kill a religious, high-principled woman."

"Not if she remained in ignorance."

"There it is. Ought she to remain in ignorance?"

Lord Hartledon leaned his head on his hand as one faint and weary. "Carr, it is of no use to go over all this ground again. If I disclosed the whole to Maude, how would it make it better for her? Would it not render it a hundred times worse? She could not inform against me; it would be contrary to human nature to suppose it; and all the result would be, that she must go through life with the awful secret upon her, rendering her days a hell, as it is rendering mine. It's true she might separate herself from me; I dare say she would; but what satisfaction would that bring to her? No; the kinder course is to allow her to remain in ignorance. Good heavens, Carr! tell it to my wife! I should never dare!"

Mr. Carr made no reply, and there ensued a pause. In truth, the matter was encompassed by difficulties on all sides: and the barrister could but acknowledge that the earl's argument had a sort of reason in it. Having tied her to himself by marriage, it might be right that he should study her happiness above all things.

"It has put new life in me," Val resumed, pointing to the letter. "Now that he has promised to keep the secret, there's little fear; and I know that he will keep his word. I must bear the burden as I best can, and keep a smiling face to the world."

"Did you read the postscript?" asked Mr. Carr; a feeling coming over him that Val had not read it.

"The postscript?"

"There's a line or two over the leaf; at the back of the letter."

The earl glanced at it, and found it run thus:

"You must be aware that there's another person who knows of this besides myself. He who was a witness at the time, and from whom *I* heard the particulars. Of course for him I cannot answer, and I think he is in England. I allude to G. G. Lord H. will know."

"Lord H." apparently did know. He gazed down at the words with a knitted brow, in which some surprise was mingled.

"I declare that I understood him that night to say the fellow had died. Did you?"

"I did," acquiesced Mr. Carr. "I certainly assumed it as a fact, until this letter came to-day. Gordon was the name, I think?"

"George Gordon."

"Since reading the letter I have been endeavouring to recollect exactly what he did say; and the impression on my mind is, that he spoke of Gordon as being *probably* dead; not that he knew it for a certainty. How I could overlook the point so as not to have inquired into it more fully, I cannot imagine. But, you see, we were not discussing details that night, or questioning facts: we were trying to disarm him — to get him not to proceed against you; and for myself, I confess I was so utterly stunned that three parts of my wits had left me."

"What is to be done?"

"We must endeavour to ascertain where Gordon is," replied Mr. Carr, as he reënclosed the letter in his pocket-book. "I'll write and inquire what *his* grounds are for saying this — 'I think he is in England;' and then trace him out — if he is to be traced. You give me carte-blanche to act?"

"You know I do, Carr."

"All right."

"And when you have traced him — what then?"

"That's an after question, and I must be guided by circumstances. And now I'll wish you good-night," continued the barrister, rising. "It's a shame to have kept you up; but the letter does contain some consolation, and I knew I could not bring it you to-morrow."

The drawing-room was lighted when Lord Hartledon got upstairs; and his wife sat there with a book, as if she meant to remain up all night. She put it down as he entered.

"Are you here still, Maude! I thought you were so tired when you came home."

"I felt tired because I met nobody I cared for," she answered, in rather a fractious tone. "Every body we know is leaving town, or has left."

"Yes, that's true."

"I shall leave too. I don't mind if we go to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" he echoed. "Why, we have the house on for three weeks longer."

"And what if we have? We are not obliged to stay in it."

The earl drew back the white-lace curtain, and stood leaning out at the open window, seeking a breath of air that hot summer's night, though indeed there was none to be felt; and if there had been, it could not have cooled the brow's inward fever. The Park lay before him, rather misty; the lights of the different vehicles passing gleamed athwart now and again; the hum of life was abroad still in the streets, of men's

free steps, of careless voices. He looked down, and wondered whether any one of those men knew what care meant as *he* knew it; whether the awful skeleton, that never quitted him by night or by day, could hold such place within another. He was the Right Honourable the Earl of Hartledon; he was wealthy; he was young; he was handsome; he had no bad habits to hamper him; he was eminently attractive: and yet he would willingly have changed lots at hazard with any one of those passers-by, could his breast, by so doing, have been eased of its load.

"What are you looking at, Val?"

His wife had come up and stolen her arm within his, as she asked the question, looking out too.

"Not at any thing in particular," he replied, making a prisoner of her hand, and gently stroking it as he held it between both of his. "The night's hot, Maude."

"O Val, I am getting so tired of London!" she exclaimed. "It is always hot now: and do you know I believe I ought to be away from it."

"Yes."

"That letter I had this morning was from Ireland, from mamma. I had told her, when I wrote last, how I felt; and you never read such a lecture as she gave me in return. She asked me whether I was mad, that I should be going galvanising about when I ought rather to be lying down three parts of my time."

"Galvanising?" said the earl.

"It was what she wrote: she never waits to choose her words — you know mamma! I suppose she meant it to imply that I was always on the move."

"Do you feel ill, Maude?"

"I don't feel exactly ill; but — I believe I ought to take care. Percival," she breathed, bending her cheek down upon her husband's shoulder, "mamma asked me whether I was trying to destroy the hope of an heir to Hartledon."

An ice-bolt shot through him at the reminder. Better that an heir to Hartledon should never be born, if it must call him father!

"I fainted to-day, Val," she continued to whisper. He passed his arm round his wife's waist, and drew her closer to him. Not upon her ought he to visit his sin: she might have enough to bear, without coldness from him; rather should he be doubly tender.

"You did not tell me of it, love."

"It was after I had been to the Botanical Gardens with those people. I felt very tired when I came in, and was taking off my bonnet, and I remember nothing more. Clotilde said I had fainted: she went down to look for you, but you had gone out. Altogether, I suppose I ought to get away from London, and be quiet."

"Why did you go out this evening?" he asked reproachfully.

"It has not hurt me," she said, nestling closer to him. "Indeed, I *will* take care, for your sake. I should never forgive myself."

"I have thought since we married, Maude, that you did not much care for me."

She made no immediate answer. She was looking out straight before her, her head still on his shoulder; and Lord Hartledon saw the tears glistening in her eyes.

"Yes, I do," she said at length; and as she spoke

she felt very conscious that she *was* caring for him. His gentle kindness, his many attractions were beginning to tell upon her heart; and a vision of the possible future, when she should love him steadily and devotedly, crossed her then and there as she stood. Lord Hartledon bent his face, and let it rest on hers.

"We shall be happy amidst the happy yet, Val; and I will be as good as gold. To begin with, we'll leave London, leave at once; I ought not to remain, and I know you have not liked it all along. It would have been better to wait until next year, when we could have had our own house; only I was impatient. I felt so proud of being married, of being your wife — I did indeed, Val — and I was in a fever for us to come and show ourselves amidst my world of friends. And there's all the truth, and a real confession!" she concluded, laughing.

"Any more?" he asked, laughing with her.

"I don't remember any more just now. And which day shall we go? I'll let you manage things for me now: I won't be headstrong again. Shall the servants go on first to Hartledon, or with us?"

"To Hartledon!" exclaimed the earl. "Is it to Hartledon you are thinking of going?"

"Of course it is," she said, standing up and looking at him in surprise. "Where else should I go?"

"I thought you wished to go to Germany!"

"And so I did; but that would not do now. It might make me ill."

"Let us go to the seaside, Maude," he rather eagerly said. "Somewhere in England."

"No, I would rather go to Hartledon. In one's own home rest and comfort can be insured; and I be-

lieve I require them. Don't you wish to go to Hartledon?" she added, watching his perplexed face.

"No, I don't. The truth is, Maude, I cannot go to Hartledon."

"Is it because you do not care to face the Ash-tons? I see! you would like to have this business settled first."

Lord Hartledon hardly heard the words. He was leaning now against the side of the window, apparently counting the cabs that passed in the road. No man ever shrunk from a prison as he shrunk from Hartledon.

"I cannot leave London at all just yet. Thomas Carr is remaining in it for me, when he ought to be on circuit, and I must stay with him. I wish you would go any where else, rather than to Hartledon."

The tone was so painfully earnest, that a momentary suspicion crossed her of his having some other motive. It passed away almost as it arose, and she accused him of being unreasonable.

Unreasonable it did indeed appear to be. "If you have any real reason to urge against Hartledon, say it out," she said. But he mentioned none — save that it was his "wish" not to go.

And Lady Hartledon, rather piqued, gave the necessary orders on the following day for the removal. No further confidential converse, or approach to it, took place between her and her husband; but up to the last moment she thought he would relent and accompany her. Nothing of the sort. He was most anxious for her every comfort on the journey, gave Hedges and her maid no end of cautions, and saw her off himself: nothing more.

"I never thought you would allow me to go alone," she resentfully whispered, as he held her hand after she was seated in the train.

He shook his head. "It is your fault, Maude. I told you I could not go to Hartledon."

And so she went down in rather an explosive frame of mind. Many a time and oft had she pictured to herself the triumph of their first visit to Calne, the place where she had taken so much pains to win him: but the arrival was certainly shorn of its glory; the gilt had been taken off the gingerbread.

CHAPTER II.

Asking the Rector.

PERHAPS Lady Hartledon had never in all her life been so much astonished as when she reached Hartledon, for the first person she saw was her mother: her mother, whom she had believed to be in some remote district of Ireland. For the moment she almost wondered whether it was really herself or her ghost. The Countess Dowager came flying down the steps — if that term may be applied to one of her age and build — in rather demonstrative affection; which, however, was not received cordially.

“What’s the matter, Maude? How you stare!”

“*Is it you, mamma? How can it be you?*”

“How can it be me?” returned the Dowager, giving Maude’s bonnet a few loud kisses. “*It is me, and that’s enough. My goodness, Maude, how thin you look! I see what it is! you’ve been killing yourself in that racketing London. It’s well I’ve come to take care of you.*”

Maude went in, feeling that she could have taken care of herself, and listening to the off-hand explanation of the Countess Dowager. “Kirton offended me,” she said; “he and his wife are like two bears; and so I packed up my things and came away at once, and got here straight from Liverpool. And now you know.”

“And is Lady Kirton quite well again?” asked

Maude helplessly, knowing that she could not turn her mother out.

"She'd be well enough but for her temper. She *was* ill, though, when they telegraphed for me; her life for three days and nights hanging on a shred. I told that fool of a Kirton before he married her that she had no constitution. I suppose you and Hart were finely disappointed to find I was not in London when you got there."

"Agreeably disappointed, I think," said Maude languidly.

"Indeed! It's polite of you to say it."

"On account of the smallness of the house," added Maude, endeavouring to be polite. "We hardly knew how to do with it ourselves, mamma."

"You wrote me word to take it. As to me, I can accommodate myself to any space. Where there's plenty of room, I take plenty; where there's not, I can put up with a closet. I have made Mirrable give me my old rooms here: you of course take Hart's now."

"I am very tired," said Maude; "I think I will have some tea and go to bed."

"Tea!" shrieked the Dowager. "I have not had dinner. And it's waiting; that's more."

"You can dine without me, mamma," she said, walking upstairs to the new rooms. The Dowager stared, and followed her: there was an indescribable something in Maude's manner that she did not like; it spoke of incipient rebellion, of an influence that had been, but was now cast off. If she lost caste once with Maude, she knew that she lost it for ever.

"You could surely take a little tiny bit of dinner, dear! You must keep up your strength, you know."

"Not any dinner; thank you. I shall be all right to-morrow, when I've slept off my fatigue."

"Well, I know I should like mine," grumbled the Countess Dowager, feeling that her position in the house was already altered from what it had been during her former sojourn, when she assumed full authority, and ordered things as she pleased, completely ignoring the new lord.

"You can have it," said Maude.

"They'll not serve it until Hart arrives," was the aggrieved answer. "I suppose he's walking from the station. He always had a queer habit of doing that."

Maude lifted her eyes in slight surprise. Her sole arrival was a matter of fact so established to herself, that it sounded strange for any one else to be in ignorance of it.

"Lord Hartledon has not come down. He is remaining in London."

The old Dowager peered at Maude through her little eyes. "What's that for?"

"Business, I believe."

"Don't tell me an untruth, Maude. You have quarrelled."

"We have not quarrelled. We are perfectly good friends."

"And you mean to tell me that he sent you down alone?"

"He sent the servants with me."

"Don't be insolent, Maude. You know what I mean."

"Why, mamma, I do not wish to be insolent. I can't tell you more, or tell it differently. Lord

Hartledon did not come down with me, and the servants did."

She spoke tartly. In her tired condition the petty conversation was wearying her; and, underlying every thing else in her heart, was the mortifying consciousness that he had *not* come home with her, chafing her temper almost beyond repression. Considering that Maude did not profess to love her husband very much, it was astonishing how keenly she felt this.

"Are you and Hart upon good terms?" asked the Countess Dowager after a pause, during which she had never taken her eyes from her daughter's face.

"It would be early days for us to be on any other."

"O," said the Dowager. "And you did not write me word from Paris that you found you had made a mistake, that you could not bear your husband! Eh, Maude?"

A tinge came into Maude's cheeks. "And you, mamma, told me that I was to rule my husband with an iron hand, never allowing him to have a will of his own, never consulting him! Both you and I were wrong," she continued quietly. "I wrote that letter in a moment of irritation; and you were assuming what has not proved to be a fact. I like my husband now quite well enough to keep friends with him: his kindness to me is excessive; but I find, with all my wish to rule him, if I had the wish, I could not do it. He has a will of his own, and he exerts it in spite of me; and I am quite sure he will continue to exert it, when-

ever he fancies he is in the right. You never saw any one so changed from what he used to be."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean in asserting his own will. But he is changed in other ways. It seems to me that he has never been quite the same man since that night in the chapel. He has been more thoughtful; and all the old yieldingness, the vacillation, is gone."

The Countess Dowager could not understand at all; neither did she believe; and she only stared at Maude.

"His not coming down with me is a proof that he exercises his own will now. I wished him to come very much, and he knew it; but you see he has not."

"And what do you say it is that's keeping him?" repeated the Countess Dowager.

"Business —"

"Ah," interrupted the Dowager with a sniff, before Maude could finish, "that's the general excuse. Always suspect it, my dear."

"Suspect what?" asked Maude.

"When a man says that, and gets his wife out of the way with it, rely upon it he has some nice little interests of his own that he is pursuing."

Lady Hartledon understood the implication; she felt nettled, and a flush rose in her cheek. In her husband's loyalty (always excepting his feelings towards Miss Ashton) she rested fully assured.

"You did not allow me to finish, mamma," was the cold rejoinder. "Business is keeping him in town, for one thing; for another, I think he cannot get over his dislike to face the Ashtons."

"Rubbish to not liking to face the Ashtons!" cried the wrathful Dowager. "Rubbish to business too! A rich young nobleman with business! He does not tell you what the business is, does he?" she cynically concluded.

"I happen to know it," answered Maude. "The Ashtons are bringing an action against him for Breach of Promise; and he and Mr. Carr the barrister are trying to arrange it without its coming to a trial."

The old lady opened her eyes and her mouth.

"It is true. They lay the damages at ten thousand pounds!"

With a prolonged shriek the Countess Dowager began to dance. Ten thousand pounds! Ten thousand pounds would keep her for ever, put out at good interest. She called the parson some unworthy names.

"I cannot give you any of the details," said Maude, in answer to the questions pressed upon her. "Percival will never speak of it, or allow me to. I learnt it — I can hardly tell you how I learnt it — by implication, I think; for it was never expressly told me. We had a mysterious visit one night from some old parson — parson or lawyer; and Percival and Mr. Carr, who happened to be at our house, were closeted with him for an hour or two. I saw that they were agitated, and guessed what it was; that Dr. Ashton was bringing an action. They could not deny it."

"The vile old hypocrite!" cried the incensed Dowager. "Ten thousand pounds! Are you sure it is as much as that, Maude?"

"Quite. Mr. Carr told me the amount."

"I wonder you encourage that man at your house."

"It was one of the things I stood out against — fruitlessly," was the quiet answer. "But I believe he means well to me, mamma; and I am sure he is doing what he can to serve my husband. They are often together over this business."

"*Of course* Hart resists the claim?"

"I don't know. I think they are trying to compromise it, so that it shall not come into court."

"What does Hartledon think of it?"

"It is worrying his life out. No, mamma, it is not too strong an expression. He says nothing; but I can see that it is half killing him. I don't believe he has slept properly since the news was brought him."

"What a sensitive simpleton he must be! And that man will stand up in the pulpit to-morrow and preach of charity!" continued the Dowager, turning her animadversions upon Dr. Ashton. You are a hypocrite too, Maude, for trying to deceive me. You and Hart are *not* on good terms; don't tell me! He'd never have let you come down alone."

Lady Hartledon would not say more. She felt vexed with her mother, vexed with her husband vexed on all sides; and she took refuge in her fatigue, and was silent.

The Dowager went to church on the following day. Maude would not go. The hot anger flushed into her cheeks at the thought of showing herself there for the first time, unaccompanied by her husband: to Maude's mind it seemed that she must look to others so very much like a deserted wife. She come home

alone; he staying in London! "Ah, why did he not come down only for this one Sunday, and go back again — if he must have gone?" she thought. A month or two ago Maude had not cared enough for him to reason like this. The Countess Dowager ensconced herself in the state-corner of the Hartledon state-pew, and from her blinking eyes looked out upon the Ashtons. Anne, with her once bright face looking rather wan, her modest demeanour; Mrs. Ashton, so essentially a gentlewoman; the doctor, sensible, clever, charitable, beyond all doubt a good man — a feeling came over the mind of the sometimes obtuse woman that of all the people before her they looked the least likely to enter on the sort of law-cause spoken of by Maude. But never a doubt struck her mind that they *had* entered on it.

Lady Hartledon remained at home, her prayer-book in her hand. She was thinking she would steal out to the evening service; it might not be so much noticed then, her being alone. Listless enough she sat, toying with her prayer-book rather than reading it. She had never pretended to be religious, had not been trained to be so; and the reading of a prayer-book, when not in church, was quite unusual; but there are seasons in a woman's life, times when peril is looked forward to, that bring thought even to the most careless nature. Maude was trying to play at "being good" and was reading the psalms for the day in an absent fashion, her thoughts elsewhere; and the morning passed on. The quiet apathy of her present state, compared to the restless fever which had stirred her during her last sojourn at Hartledon, when she was kept in the ferment of scheming and plotting to win the heir, was something remarkable.

Suddenly she was burst in upon by the Countess Dowager: that estimable lady's bonnet was awry, her flaxen curls pushed back, her face a bright scarlet, altogether in a commotion of anger.

"I didn't suppose you'd have done it, Maude! You might play tricks upon other people, I think, but not upon your own mother."

The interlude was rather welcome to Maude; it took her out of her listless apathy. Not for some few moments, however, could she understand the cause of complaint.

It appeared that the Countess Dowager, with that absence of all sense of the fitness of things which so eminently characterised her, had joined the Ashton family after service, inquiring with quite motherly solicitude after Mrs. Ashton's health, complimenting Anne upon her charming looks; making herself, in short, as agreeable as she knew how, and completely ignoring the past in regard to her son-in-law. Gentlewomen in mind and manners, they did not repulse her, were even courteously civil; and she graciously accompanied them across the road to the rectory-gate, and there took a cordial leave, saying she would look in on the morrow. In returning, she met Dr. Ashton. He was passing her with nothing but a lift of the hat; but he little knew the Countess Dowager. She seized upon his hand, shook it, nearly kissed it; said how grieved she was not to have had an opportunity of explaining away her part in the past; that she hoped he would let bygones be bygones; and finally, while the clergyman was scheming how to get away from her without absolute rudeness, she astonished him with a communication touching the action-at-law. There ensued a little mutual

misapprehension, followed by a few emphatic words of denial from Dr. Ashton; and the Countess Dowager walked away, with a scarlet face, and an explosion of anger against her daughter.

Lady Hartledon was not yet callous to the proprieties of life; and the intrusion on the Ashtons, which her mother confessed to, half frightened, half shamed her. But the Dowager's wrath at having been misled bore down every thing. Dr. Ashton had entered no action whatever against the Earl of Hartledon; had never thought of doing it.

"And you, you wicked ungrateful girl, to come home to me with such an invention, and cause me to start off on a fool's errand! Do you suppose I should have gone and humbled myself to those people, but for hoping to bring the parson to a sense of what he was doing *as* a parson, in going-in for those enormous damages?"

She stood wiping her inflamed face gingerly, on account of its not being quite so clear from adjuncts as it might be; her handkerchief rolled into a ball. The corners of her shawl were flung back, and her smart pink gauze gown, flounced to the waist with little flounces, looked the size of a balloon. Maude scarcely understood yet.

"I have not come home to you with any invention, mamma. Dr. Ashton has entered the action."

"He has not," raved the Dowager. "It is a hoax, an infamous hoax, that you have played off upon me: you couldn't find any plea of excuse for your husband's staying in London, and so pitched upon this. What with you, and what with Kirton's ingratitude, and *her* sauce, I shall be driven out of house and home!"

"I won't say another word until you are calm and can talk common-sense," said Maude, leaning back in her chair, and opening her prayer-book again.

"Common-sense! What am I talking but common-sense? When a child begins to mislead her own mother, the world ought to come to an end."

Maude took no notice.

There happened to be some water standing on a table, and the Dowager dashed out a tumbler and drank it, though not much accustomed to the beverage. Her run home from church in the heat had made her thirsty. Untying the strings of her bonnet and tilting it off, she sat down by Maude, a little calmer.

"Perhaps you'll explain this at your convenience, Maude."

"There is nothing to explain," was the answer. "What I told you was the truth. The action *has* been entered against Percival, by the Ashtons."

"The action has not, then."

"But, mamma, I assure you that it has," said Maude, closing her book. "I told you of the evening we first had notice of it; and that the damages are laid at ten thousand pounds; do you think I could have invented that, or gone to sleep and dreamt it? I am sure if Val has gone down once to that Temple over it, he has gone fifty times. He would not go for pleasure."

The Countess Dowager sat fanning herself quietly; for her daughter's words were gaining ground.

"There's a mistake somewhere, Maude, and it is on your side and not mine. I'll lay my life that no action has been entered by Dr. Ashton. The man spoke truth; I can read truth when I see it as well as

any body: his face flushed up with pain at such a thing being said of him. It may not be difficult to explain this contradiction."

"Do you think not?" returned Maude, her tone of indifference exciting the listener to anger.

"I should say that Hart is deceiving you. If any action is entered against him at all, it's not that sort of action; or perhaps the young lady is not Miss Ashton, but some other: he's just the kind of man to be drawn into promising marriage to a dozen or two. It is all very clever of him to palm you off with this tale: a man may get into five hundred troubles, not convenient for his wife to know."

Except that Lady Hartledon's cheek flushed a little, she made no answer; she held firm — at least she thought she held firm — to her own side of the case. Her mother, on the contrary, adopted the new view, and dismissed it from her thoughts accordingly.

Maude went to church in the evening. She sat by herself in the great pew, pale and quiet. Anne Ashton was alone; and the two whilom rivals, the triumphant and the rejected, could look at each other to their heart's content. Not very triumphant was Maude feeling. Strange perhaps to say, the suggestion of the old Dowager, like instilled poison, was making its way into her very veins. Her thoughts had been busy with the matter ever since. One positive conviction lay in her heart — that Dr. Ashton, now reading the first lesson before her, for he was taking the whole of the service that night, could not, under any circumstance, be guilty of a false assertion or a subterfuge. One solution of the difficulty presented itself to her — that her mother, in her irascibility, had misunderstood the

rector; and yet that was improbable. As Maude half sat, half lay back in the pew, for the weary faint feeling was especially upon her that evening, she thought that she would give a great deal for the matter to be set at rest.

When the service was over, she took the more secluded way home; the servants, those who had attended, returning as usual by the road. She had reached the turning where the three paths converged, when the faintness which had been hovering over her all the evening grew suddenly more perceptible; and but for catching hold of a tree, she might have fallen. It grew better in a few moments, but she did not yet quit the support of the friendly tree.

Very much surprised was the rector of Calne to come up and see the young Countess of Hartledon in this position: her arm round the trunk of the tree, her brow, white and damp, pressed upon it. Every Sunday evening, after service, he went in to see a man in one of the cottages, who was dying of consumption, and he was on his road thither now. He would have preferred not to speak to Lady Hartledon: but she looked ill, in need of assistance; and in common Christian kindness he could not pass her by.

"I beg your pardon, Lady Hartledon. Are you ill?"

She caught at his offered arm with her disengaged hand, as an additional support; and her white face turned a shade whiter.

"I beg yours," she said, when she was able to speak, in apology for having thus seized upon him. "A sudden faintness overtook me. I am better now."

"Will you allow me to walk on with you?"

"Thank you; just a little way. If you will not mind it."

That he must have understood the feeling which prompted the last few words there was no doubt: and perhaps had Lady Hartledon been in the possession of her keenest senses, she might never have spoken them. Pride and health go out of us together. Dr. Ashton took her on his arm, and they walked slowly on in the direction of the little bridge. Her colour was coming into her face again, her strength into her frame.

"The heat of the day has affected you, possibly, Lady Hartledon?"

"Yes, perhaps: I have felt faint at times lately. The church was very hot to-night."

Nothing more was said until the bridge was gained, and then Maude released his arm.

"Dr. Ashton, I thank you very much. You have been a friend in need."

"But are you sure you are strong enough to go on alone? I will take you to the house if you are not."

"Quite strong enough now. Thank you once again."

As he was bowing his farewell, a sudden impulse to speak, and set the matter that was troubling her at rest, came over her mind. Without a moment's deliberation, without an instant given to weigh her words, she rushed upon it; the ostensible plea being an apology for her mother's having spoken to him.

"Yes, I told Lady Kirton she was labouring under some misapprehension," he quietly answered.

"Will you forgive *me* also for speaking of it?"

she murmured. "Since my mother came home with the news of what you said, I have been in a sea of conjecture: I could not attend to the service for thinking of it; I might as well not have been in church — and that is a curious confession to make to you, Dr. Ashton. Is it indeed true that you know nothing of the matter?"

"Lady Kirton told me in so many words that I had entered an action against Lord Hartledon for Breach of Promise, and laid the damages at ten thousand pounds," returned Dr. Ashton, with a plainness of speech and a cynical manner that made her blush. And she saw at once that he had done nothing of the sort; saw it without any more decisive denial.

"But the action has been entered," said Lady Hartledon.

"I beg your pardon, madam. Lord Hartledon is, I should imagine, the only man living who could suppose me capable of such a thing."

"And you have *not* entered on it?" she reiterated, half bewildered with the denial.

"Most certainly not. When I parted with Lord Hartledon on a certain evening, which probably your ladyship remembers, I washed my hands of him for good, desiring never to approach him in any way whatever, never to hear of him, never to see him. Your husband, madam, is safe for me: I desire nothing better than to forget that such a man is in existence."

Lifting his hat, he walked away. And the Lady Hartledon stood and gazed after him as if she were in a dream.

CHAPTER III.

Mr. Carr at Work.

THOMAS CARR was treading his way through the mazy precincts of Gray's Inn, with that quick step and absorbed manner known only, I think, to the busy man of this busy metropolis. He was on his way to make some inquiries of a firm of solicitors, Messrs. Kedge and Reck, strangers to him, except by name.

Up some dark and dingy stairs, he knocked at a dark and dingy door: which, after a minute, opened of itself by some ingenious contrivance, and let him into a passage, whence he turned into a room, where two clerks were writing at a desk.

"Can I see Mr. Kedge?"

"Not in," said one of the clerks without looking up.

"Mr. Reck, then?"

"Not in."

"When will either of them be in?" continued the barrister; thinking that if he were Messrs. Kedge and Reck the clerk would get his discharge for incivility.

"Can't say. What's your business?"

"My business is with them: not with you."

"You can see the managing clerk."

"I wish to see one of the partners."

"Could you give your name?" continued the gentleman, equably.

Mr. Carr handed in his card. The clerk glanced at it, and surreptitiously showed it to his companion; and both of them looked up at him. Mr. Carr of the Temple was known by reputation, and they condescended to become civil.

"Take a seat for a moment, sir," said the one. "I'll inquire how long Mr. Kedge will be; but Mr. Reck's not in town to-day."

A few minutes, and Thomas Carr found himself in a small square room with the head of the firm, who was a youngish man and somewhat of a dandy, especially genial in manner, as if in contrast to his clerk. He welcomed the rising barrister.

"There's as much difficulty in getting to see you as if you were the Pope of Rome," cried Mr. Carr good-humouredly.

The lawyer laughed. "Hopkins did not know you; and strangers are generally introduced to Mr. Reck, or to our managing clerk. What can I do for you, Mr. Carr?"

"I don't know that you can do any thing for me," said Mr. Carr, seating himself; "but I hope you can. At the present moment I am engaged in sifting a piece of complicated business for a friend; a private matter entirely, which it is necessary to keep private. I am interested in it greatly myself, as you may readily believe when it is keeping me from circuit; indeed it may almost be called my own affair," he added, seeing the eyes of the lawyer fixed upon him, and not caring that they should see into his business too clearly. "I fancy that you have a clerk, or had a clerk, who is cognisant of one or two points in regard to it: can you

put me in the way of finding out where he is? His name is Gordon."

"Gordon! We have no clerk of that name. Never had one, that I remember. How came you to fancy it?"

"I heard it from my own clerk, Mr. Taylor. One day last week I happened to say before him that I'd give a five-pound note out of my pocket to get at the present whereabouts of this man Gordon. Taylor is a shrewd fellow; full of useful bits of information, and knows, I really believe, three parts of London by name. He immediately said that a young man of that name was with Messrs. Kedge and Reck, of Gray's Inn, either as clerk, or in some other capacity; and when he described this clerk of yours, I felt nearly sure that it was the man I am looking for. I got Taylor to make inquiries, and he did, I believe of one of your clerks; but he could learn nothing, except that nobody of that name was connected with you now. Taylor persists that he is or was connected with you; and so I thought the shortest plan to settle the matter was to ask yourselves."

"We have no clerk of that name," repeated Mr. Kedge, pushing back with his elbow some papers on the table. "Never had one."

"Understand," said Mr. Carr, thinking it just possible that the lawyer might be mistaking his motives, "I have nothing to allege against the man, and do not seek to damage him. The real fact is, that I do not want to see him or to be brought into personal contact with him; I only want to know whether he is in London, and if so, where?"

"I assure you he is not connected with us," re-

peated Mr. Kedge. "I'd tell you so in a minute if he were."

"Well, then, of course I can only apologise for having troubled you," said the barrister rising. "Taylor must have been mistaken. And yet I would have backed his word, when he positively asserts a thing, against the world. I hardly ever knew him wrong."

Mr. Kedge was playing with the drooping locket on his watch-chain, his head bent in thought.

"Wait a moment, Mr. Carr. I remember now that we took a clerk temporarily into the office in the latter part of last year. His writing did not suit, and we kept him but a week or two. I don't know what his name was, but it might have been Gordon."

"Do you remember what sort of a man he was?" asked Mr. Carr somewhat eagerly.

"I really do not. You see I don't come much into contact with our clerks. Reck does; but he's not here to-day. I fancy he had red hair."

"Gordon has reddish hair."

"You had better see Kimberly," said the solicitor, ringing a bell. "He is our managing clerk, and knows every thing."

A gray-haired, silent-looking man came in with stooping shoulders. Mr. Kedge, without any circumlocution, asked whether he remembered any clerk of the name of Gordon having been in the house. Mr. Kimberly responded by saying that they never had one in the house of the name.

"Well, I thought not," observed the principal. "There was one in for a short while, you know, while Hopkins was ill. I forget his name."

"His name was Druitt, sir. We employed a man

of the name of Gorton to do some out-door business for us at times," continued the managing clerk, turning his eyes on the barrister; "but not lately."

"What sort of business?"

"Serving writs."

"Gorton is not Gordon," remarked Mr. Kedge with legal acumen. "By the way, Kimberly, I have heard nothing of Gorton lately. What has become of him?"

"I have not the least idea, sir. We parted in a huff, so he'd not perhaps be likely to come in my way again. Some business that he mismanaged, if you remember, sir, down at Calne."

"When he arrested one man for another," laughed the lawyer, "and got entangled in a coroner's inquest, and I don't know what all."

Mr. Carr had pricked up his ears; he scarcely dared to breathe. But his manner was careless to a degree.

"The man he arrested being Lord Hartledon; the man he ought to have arrested being the Honourable Mr. Elster," he interposed, laughing.

"What! do you know of it?" cried the lawyer.

"I remember hearing of it; I was intimate with Mr. Elster at the time."

"He has become Lord Hartledon."

"Yes. But about this Gorton? I should not be in the least surprised if he is the man I am inquiring for. Can you describe him to me, Mr. Kimberly?"

"He is a short, slight man, under thirty, with red hair and whiskers."

Mr. Carr nodded.

"Light hair with a reddish tinge it has been de-

scribed to me. Do you happen to be at all acquainted with his antecedents?"

"Not I; I know nothing of the man," said Mr. Kedge. "Kimberly does, perhaps."

"No, sir," dissented Kimberly. "He had been to Australia, I believe; and that's all I know about him."

"It is the same man," said Mr. Carr quietly. "And if you can tell me any thing about him," he continued, turning to the elder man, "I shall be exceedingly obliged to you. To begin with — when did you first know him?"

But at this juncture there occurred an interruption. Hopkins the discourteous came in with a card, which he presented to his principal. The gentleman was waiting to see Mr. Kedge. Two more clients were also waiting, he resentfully added.

Thomas Carr rose, and the end of it was that he went with Mr. Kimberly to his room.

"It's Carr of the Temple," whispered Mr. Kedge in his clerk's ear.

"O, I know him, sir."

"All right. If you can help him, do so."

"I first knew Gorton about fifteen months ago," observed the clerk when they were shut in. "A friend of mine, dead now, spoke to me of him as a respectable young fellow who had fallen in the world, and asked if I could help him to some employment. I think he told me somewhat of his history; but I quite forget it. I know he was very low then, with hardly a crust to eat."

"Did this friend of yours call him Gorton or Gordon?" interrupted Mr. Carr.

"Gorton. I never heard him called Gordon at all.

I remember seeing a book of his that he seemed to set some store by. It was printed in old English, and had his name on the title-page: 'George Gorton. From his affectionate father, W. Gorton.' I employed him in some out-door work. He knew London perfectly well, and seemed to know people too."

"And he had been to Australia?"

"He had been to Australia, I feel sure. One day he accidentally let slip some words about Melbourne, which he could not well have done unless he had seen the place. I taxed him with it, and he shuffled it off with some excuse; but in such a manner that convinced me he had been there."

"And now, Mr. Kimberly, I am going to ask you another question. You spoke of his having been at Calne; I infer that you sent him to the place on the errand to Mr. Elster. Try and recollect whether his going thither was entirely your own spontaneous act, or whether he was the original (though, perhaps, surreptitious) mover in the journey?"

The gray-haired clerk looked up, as if not understanding.

"You don't quite take me, I see."

"Yes, I do, sir; but I was thinking back. So far as I can recollect, it was our own spontaneous act. I am sure I had no cause to think otherwise at the time. We had had a deal of trouble with the Honourable Mr. Elster; and when it was found that he had left town for the family seat, we came to the resolution to send and arrest him."

Thomas Carr paused. "Do you know any thing of Gordon's — or Gorton's — doings in Calne? Did you ever hear him speak of them afterwards?"

"I don't know that I did particularly. The excuse he made to us for arresting Lord Hartledon for his brother was, that they were so much alike he mistook the one for the other."

"Which would infer that he knew Mr. Elster by sight."

"It might; yes. It was not for the mistake that we discharged him; indeed, not for any thing at all connected with Calne. He did seem to have gone about his business there in a very loose way, and to have paid less attention to our interests than to the gossip of the place; of which there was a tolerable amount just then, on account of the Earl of Hartledon's unfortunate death. Gorton was set upon another job or two when he returned; and one of those he contrived to mismanage so wofully, that I would give him no more to do. It struck me that he must drink, or else was accessible to a bribe."

Mr. Carr nodded his head; he thought the latter more than probable. His fingers were playing with a newspaper, which happened to lie on the clerk's desk; and he put the next question with a very well-assumed air of carelessness, as if it were but the passing thought of the moment.

"Did he ever talk about Mr. Elster?"

"Never but once. He came to my house one evening to tell me he had discovered the hiding-place of a gentleman we were looking for. I was taking my glass of cold gin-and-water after supper, the only stimulant I ever touch — and the doctors order me that; one glass every night. I could not do less than ask him to help himself. You see, sir, we did not look upon him as a common sheriff's man: and he did help him-

self pretty freely. That made him talkative. I fancy his head is not strong to stand much; and he began rambling upon the recent affairs at Calne: he had not been back above a week then."

"And he spoke of Mr. Elster?"

"He spoke a good deal of him as the new Lord Hartledon, all in a rambling sort of way. He hinted that it might be in his power to bring home to him some great crime."

"The man must have been drunk indeed!" remarked Mr. Carr, with the most perfect assumption of indifference; a very contrast to the dart of fear that shot through his heart. "What crime, pray? I hope he particularised it."

"What he seemed to hint at was some unfair play in connection with his brother's death," said the old clerk, lowering his voice. "'A man at his wit's end for money would do many queer things,' he remarked."

Mr. Carr's eyes flashed. "What a dangerous fool he must be! You surely did not listen to him!"

"I, sir! I stopped him pretty quickly, and bade him put a pitch-plaster over his mouth, until he came to his sober senses again. O, they make great simpletons of themselves, some of these young fellows, when they get the drink into them."

"They do that," said the barrister. "Did he ever allude to the matter again?"

"Never; and the next day, when I saw him, he seemed ashamed of himself, and asked if he had not been talking a lot of nonsense. It was about a fortnight after that we parted, and I have never seen him since."

"And you really do not know what has become of him?"

"Not at all. I should think he has left London."

"Why?"

"Because if he had remained in it he'd be sure to have come bothering me to employ him again; unless, indeed, he has found some one else to do it."

"Well," said Mr. Carr rising, "will you do me this favour? If you come across the man again, or can get tidings of him in any way, let me know it at once. I do not want him to hear of me, or that I have made inquiries about him. I only wish to ascertain *where* he is, if that be possible. Any one bringing me this information privately will find it well worth their while."

He went forth into the busy streets again, sick at heart; and upon reaching his chambers wrote a note for a detective officer, and put some business into his hands.

Meanwhile the Earl of Hartledon remained on in London. When the term for which they had engaged the furnished house in Piccadilly was expired, he took lodgings in Grafton Street; and there he stayed, his frame of mind restless and unsatisfactory. Lady Hartledon wrote to him sometimes, and he answered her. She said not a word of the discovery she had made in regard to the alleged action-at-law; but she never failed in every letter to ask what he was doing, and when he was coming home — meaning Hartledon. He put her off in the best manner he was able: he and Carr were very busy together, he said: as to home, he could not fix any particular time. And Lady Hartle-

don bottled up her curiosity and her wrath, and waited with what patience she had.

The truth was — and, perhaps, the reader may have divined it — that graver motives than the sensitive feeling of not liking to face the Ashtons, was keeping the earl from his wife and Hartledon. He had once, in his bachelor days, wished himself a savage in some remote and inaccessible desert of land, where his civilised acquaintance could not come near him; he had a thousand times more cause to wish himself one now.

One dusty day, when the excessive heat of summer was on the wane, he went down to Mr. Carr's chambers, and found that gentleman abroad. Not gone out for long, the clerk thought; and the earl sat down and waited for him. The room he was in looked out on the cool garden, on the quiet river; in the one there was not a soul save Mr. Broom himself, who had gone in to watch the progress of his chrysanthemums, and was stooping lovingly over the beds; on the other a steamer, freighted with a straggling few, was plodding up the river against the tide; the contrast between this quiet scene and the bustling, dusty, jostling world he had come in from, was grateful even to the earl's disturbed heart; and he felt half inclined to go round to the garden and fling himself on the lawn, and take his rest there, as a man might who was free from care.

Mr. Carr indulged in the costly luxury of three rooms in the Temple; his sitting-room, which was his work-room, a bed-chamber, and a little outer ante-place, called by courtesy a room, that was the sanctum of the clerk. The earl was in the sitting-room, but he

could hear the clerk moving about in the ante-room, as if he had no writing on hand that morning. When he was tired of waiting, he called him in.

"I say, Mr. Taylor, how long do you think he'll be? I've been asleep, I think."

"Well, I thought he'd have been in before now, my lord. He generally tells me if he's going out for any length of time; but he said nothing to-day."

"A newspaper would be something to while away one's time, or a book," grumbled the earl. "Not those," he added, glancing at a bookcase full of ponderous law-volumes.

"Your lordship has taken the cream out of them already," remarked the clerk with a laugh; and the earl's brow knitted at the words. He had "taken the cream" out of those old law-books, if studying them could do it, for he had been at them pretty often of late.

But Mr. Taylor's remark had no ulterior meaning. Being a shrewd observant man, he could not fail to suspect that Lord Hartledon was in a scrape of some sort or another; but from a word dropped by his master he supposed it to involve nothing more than a question of debt; and he never suspected that the word had been dropped purposely. "Scamps would claim money twice over when they could," said Mr. Carr; and Elster was a careless man, always losing his receipts. He was a short, slight man, this clerk — in build something like his master — with an intelligent, silent face, a small sharp nose, and fair hair. He had been born a gentleman, he was wont to say; and indeed he looked like one; but he had not received an education commensurate with that fact, and had to

make his own way in the world. He might do it yet, perhaps, he remarked one day to the earl; and certainly, if steady perseverance could effect it, he would: all his spare time was spent in study.

"He is not gone to one of those blessed consultations in somebody's chambers, is he?" cried Val. "I have known them to last three hours."

"I have known them to last longer than that," said the clerk. "But there are none on just now."

"I can't think what has become of him. He made an appointment with me for this morning. And where's his *Times*?"

Mr. Taylor could not tell where; he had been looking for the newspaper on his own score. It was not to be found; and they could only come to the conclusion that the barrister had taken it out with him.

"I wish you'd go out and buy me one," said Val.

"I'll go with pleasure, my lord. But suppose anybody comes to the door?"

"O, I'll answer it. They'll think Carr has taken on a new clerk."

Mr. Taylor laughed, and went out. The earl, tired of sitting, began to pace the room and the ante-room. Most men would have taken their departure; but he had nothing to do abroad; he had latterly shunned that portion of the world called society, and was as well in Mr. Carr's chambers as in his own lodgings, or in strolling about with his troubled heart. While thus occupied, there came a soft tap to the outer door — as was sure to be the case, the clerk being absent — and Val drew it open. A middle-aged, quiet-looking man stood there, who had nothing particularly noticeable in his appearance, except a pair

of deep-set dark eyes, under bushy eyebrows that were turning gray.

"Mr. Carr within?"

"Mr. Carr's not in," replied the temporary porter; "I daresay you can wait."

"Likely to be long?"

"I should think not. *I* have been waiting for him these two hours."

The applicant entered, and sat down in the clerk's room. Lord Hartledon went into the other, and stood drumming on the window-pane, as he gazed out on the grass of the Temple garden.

"I'd go, but for that note of Carr's," he said to himself. "If he — halloa! that's his voice at last."

Mr. Carr and his clerk had returned together. The former, after a few moments, came in to the earl.

"A nice fellow you are, Carr! Sending me word to be here at eleven o'clock, and then walking off for two mortal hours!"

"I sent you word to wait for me at your own home!"

"Well, that is good!" returned the earl, after a prolonged stare. It said, 'Be here at eleven,' as plain as writing could say it."

"And there was a postscript on the other side the sheet, telling you, on second thought, *not* to be here, but to wait at home for me," said Mr. Carr. "I remembered a matter of business that would take me up your way this morning, and thought I'd go on to you. It's just your careless fashion, Hartledon, reading only half your letters! You should have turned it over."

"Who was to think there was any thing on the

other side? Folks don't turn their letters over from curiosity when they are concluded on the first page."

"I never had a letter in my life but I turned it over to make sure," observed the more careful barrister. "I have had my walk for nothing."

"And I have been cooling my heels here! And you took the newspaper with you!"

"No, I did not. Churton sent in from his rooms to borrow it."

"Well, let the misunderstanding go, and don't be angry with me if I'm cross. Do you know, Carr, I think I am growing ill-tempered from trouble. What news have you for me?"

"I'll tell you that by and by. There's no time just now. Do you know who that is in the other room?"

"Not I. He seemed to stare me inside-out in a quiet way, as I let him in."

"Ay. It's Green the detective. At times a question occurs to me whether that's really his name, or one he assumes in his profession. He has come to report at last. Had you better remain?"

"Why not?"

Mr. Carr looked dubious.

"You can make some excuse for my presence."

"It's not that. I'm thinking if you should let slip a word —"

"Carr! Is it likely?"

"Inadvertently, I meant."

"There's no fear. You have not mentioned my name to him?"

"I retort in your own words — Is it likely? He does not know why he is being employed or what I

want with the man I wish traced. At present he is working, so far as that goes, in the dark. I might have put him on a false scent, just as cleverly and unsuspectingly as I daresay he could put me; but I've not done it. What's the matter with you to-day, Hartledon? You look ill."

"I only look what I am, then," was the answer. "I'm no worse than usual. I'd rather be transported — I'd rather be hung, for the matter of that — than lead the life of misery I am leading. At times I feel inclined to give in, but then comes the thought of Maude."

CHAPTER IV.

Somebody Else at Work.

THEY were shut in together: the detective officer, Mr. Carr, and Lord Hartledon. "You may speak freely before his gentleman," observed Mr. Carr, as if in apology for a third being present. "He knows the parties, and is almost as much interested in the affair as I am."

The detective glanced at Lord Hartledon with his deep eyes, but he did not know him, and took out a note-book, on which some words and figures were dotted down, foreign hieroglyphics to any body's eyes but his own. Squaring his elbows on the table after a fashion more easy than elegant, he began in an abrupt tone; and he appeared to have a habit of cutting short his words and sentences.

"Haven't succeeded yet as could wish, Mr. Carr; leastways, not altogether: have had to be longer over it, too, than thought for. George Gordon: Scotch by birth, so far as can learn; left an orphan; lived mostly in London. Served time to medical practitioner in general line, locality Paddington, London. Idle, visionary, loose in conduct, good-natured, fond of roving. Surgeon wouldn't keep him as assistant; might have done it, he says, had G. G. been of settled disposition; saw him in drink three times. Next turns up in Scotland, assistant to a doctor there; name Mair, locality Kirkcudbrightshire. Remained there less than a year;

left, saying he was going to Australia. So far," broke off the speaker, raising his eyes to Mr. Carr's, "particulars tally with the information supplied to me by you."

"Just so."

"And then my further work began," continued Mr. Green. "Afraid what I've got together won't be satisfactory; differ from you in opinion, at any rate. G. G. went to Australia; no doubt of that; friend of his got a letter or two from him while there: last one enclosed two ten-pound notes, borrowed by G. G. before he went out. Last letter said he'd been up to the diggings, been very successful; was coming home with his money, mentioned ship he meant to sail in. Hadn't been in Australia twelve months."

"Who was the friend?" asked Mr. Carr, interrupting the curt sentences.

"Very respectable man; gentleman; former fellow-pupil with Gordon in London; in good practice for himself now; locality Kensington. After last letter, friend was perpetually looking out for G. G. G. G. did not make his appearance; conclusion friend draws is that he did not come back. Feels sure that Gordon, whether poor or rich, in ill-report or in good-report, would have come to him direct."

"I happen to know that he did come back," said Mr. Carr.

"Don't think it," was the unceremonious rejoinder.

"I know it positively. And that he was in London."

The detective looked over his notes, whistling

softly to himself, as if completely ignoring Mr. Carr's words.

"Be bound you heard, gentlemen, of that mutiny on board the ship *Morning Star*, some three years ago? Made a noise at the time."

"Well?"

"Ringleader was this same man, George Gordon."

"No!" exclaimed Mr. Carr.

"Fact. Leastways, no reasonable doubt of it. Friend of his feels none: can't understand, he says, how G. G. could have become suddenly cruel; never was that. Pooh! when men have been leading lawless lives at Australian diggings, perhaps took regularly to drinking — which G. G. was inclined to before — they're ready for any crime under the sun."

"But how do you connect Gordon with the ringleader of that diabolical mutiny?"

"Easy enough. Same name, George Gordon: wrote word to friend the ship he was coming home in — *Morning Star*. 'Twas the same; and price is on G. G.'s head to this day: shouldn't mind getting it. Needn't pother over it, sir; 'twas Gordon for a fact: but he'd never put his foot in London."

"If a fact, it would account for his not showing himself to his friend — assuming that he did come back," observed Mr. Carr.

"Friend says not. Sure that G. G., whatever might have been guilty of, would go to him direct; knew he might depend on him in any trouble. A proof, he argues, that G. G. never came back."

"But I tell you he did come back," repeated the barrister. "It is a strange thing that the similarity of name never struck me," he added, turning to Lord

Hartledon. "I took some interest in that mutiny at the time; but I declare I never thought to connect this man or his name with it. It is a noted name, at any rate, if not a very common one."

Lord Hartledon nodded. He had sat silent throughout, a little apart, his face somewhat turned from them, as if the business did not concern him, though he was listening as a friend.

"And now I will relate to you what more I know of Gordon," resumed Mr. Carr, moving his chair nearer the detective, and partially screening Lord Hartledon by the fresh position. He was in London last year, employed by Kedge and Reck, of Gray's Inn, to serve writs. What he had done with himself from the time of the mutiny — allowing that he was identical with the Gordon of that business — I daresay nobody living could tell, himself excepted. He was calling himself Gorton last autumn. Not much of a change from his own name."

"George Gorton," assented the detective, with a sort of grunt.

"Yes, George Gorton," replied Mr. Carr, who had taken the assenting remark as a question. "I knew this much when I first applied to you. I did not mention it because — because I preferred to let you go to work without it. Understand me, that it is the same man I *know*; but there are nevertheless discrepancies in the case that I cannot reconcile; circumstances that I am unable to understand; and I thought you might possibly arrive at some knowledge of where the man is without this clue, better than with it."

"Sorry to differ from you in opinion, Mr. Carr; must hold to the belief that George Gorton, employed

at Kedge and Reck's, was not the same man at all," came the cool and obstinate rejoinder. "Have sifted the apparent similarity between the two, and drawn my conclusion accordingly."

The remark implied that the detective was wiser on the subject of George Gorton than Mr. Carr had bargained for, and a shadow of apprehension stole through him. It was by no means his wish that the keen detective and the man should come into contact; all he wanted was to find out where he was at present, *not* that he should be spoken to or meddled with. This he had fully explained in the first instance, and the other had acquiesced in his curt way.

"See you are thinking me uncommon clever, getting on the track of George Gorton, when there's nothing on the surface to connect him with the man you are wanting," remarked the detective with professional vanity. "Came upon it accidentally; as well confess it; don't want to assume more credit than's due. 'Twas in this way. Same evening that had taken your instructions, had to see the managing-clerk of Kedge and Reck; was engaged on a little matter for 'em. Our business over, he asked me if I happened to know any thing of a man named George Gorton, or Gordon — as I seemed to know something of pretty well everybody. Had just been asked here — I — about George Gordon, naturally connected the two questions together. Inquired of Kimberly *why* he suspected his clerk Gorton should be Gordon; Kimberly replied that he did not suspect him, but a gentleman did, who had been there that day. This put me on Gorton's track."

"And you followed it up?"

"Course I did; keeping my own counsel. Took

it up in haste, though; no deliberation; went off to Calne, without first comparing notes with Gordon's friend the surgeon."

"To Calne!" exclaimed Mr. Carr, while Lord Hartledon turned his face and took a sharp look at the speaker.

A nod was the only answer. "Got down; thought at first as you do, Mr. Carr, that man was the same, and was on right track. Went to work in my own way; was a countryman just come into a snug bit of inheritance, looking out for a corner of land. Wormed out a bit here and a bit there; heard this from one, that from another; nearly got an interview with my Lord Hartledon himself, as candidate for one of his farms."

"Lord Hartledon was not at Calne, I think," interrupted Mr. Carr, speaking upon impulse.

"Know it now; didn't then; and wanted, for own purposes, to get a sight of him and a word with him. Went to his place: saw a queer old creature in yeller gauze; saw the earl's wife, too, at a distance; fine woman; got intimate with butler, name Hedges; got intimate with two or three more; altogether turned the late doings of Mr. Gorton there inside-out."

"Well?" said Mr. Carr, in his surprise.

"Care to hear 'em?" continued the detective, after a moment's pause; and a feeling crossed the breast of Mr. Carr, that if ever he had a deep man to deal with it was this, in spite of his blunt frankness, his apparent ready simplicity. "Gorton went down on his errand for Kedge and Reck, writ in pocket, for Mr. Elster; had boasted there that he knew him. Can't quite make out whether did or not; any rate, served

the writ on Lord Hartledon in mistake. Lordship made a joke of it; took up the matter as a brother ought; wrote himself to Kedge and Reck to get it settled. Brothers quarrelled; a day or two, and elder one was drowned, nobody seems to know how; younger became Lord Hartledon. Gorton stopped on, against orders from Kimberly; said afterwards, by way of excuse, had been served with summons to attend inquest. Couldn't say much at inquest, or *didn't*; was asked if he witnessed accident; said 'No,' but some think he did still. Showed himself at Hartledon afterwards, trying to get an interview with new earl; new earl wouldn't see him, and butler turned him out. Gorton, in a rage, went back to inn, got some drink, said he might be able to *make* his lordship see him yet; hinted at some secret, but too far gone to know what he said; began boasting of adventures in Australia. Loose man there, one Pike, took him in charge, and saw him off by rail for London."

"Yes?" said Mr. Carr, for the speaker had stopped.

"That's all, pretty near, as far as Gorton goes. I got a clue to an address he gave down there, a place in London, where he might be heard of: got it oddly, too; but that's no matter. Came up again and went to the address; could learn nothing; tracked here and tracked there, both for Gordon and Gorton; found that Gorton disappeared close upon the time that he was cast adrift by Kimberly. Is not in London, as far as can be traced; where gone, can't tell yet. So much done, I gathered my experiences together, summed up the whole, and came here to-day to state 'em."

"Proceed, then," said Mr. Carr.

The detective put his note-book in his pocket, and with his elbows still on the table, pressed his fingers together alternately as he stated his points, speaking less abruptly than before.

"My conclusion is — the Gordon you spoke to me about was the same Gordon who led the mutiny on board the Morning Star; that he never, after that, came back to England; has never been heard of, in short, by any living soul in it. That the Gorton employed by Kedge and Reck was another man altogether. Neither is to be found; the one may have had his grave in the sea years ago; the other has disappeared out of London life since last October, and I can't trace how or where."

Mr. Carr listened in silence. To reiterate again that the two men were identical the one with the other, would have been waste of breath, since he could not avow how he knew it, dared not give so much as the faintest clue. The detective himself had unconsciously furnished a proof.

"Will you tell me your grounds for believing them to be different men?" he asked.

"Nay," said the keen detective, "the shortest way would be for you to give me your grounds for thinking them to be the same."

"I cannot do it," said Mr. Carr. "It might involve — no, I cannot do it."

"Well, I suspected so. I don't mind mentioning one or two on my side. The description of Gorton, as I got it, and minutely too, from Kimberly, does not accord with that of Gordon, as given me by his friend the surgeon. I wrote out the portrait of Gorton in words, and took it to him. Is this Gordon? I asked.

No, it is not, said he; and I'm sure he spoke the truth."

"Gordon, on his return from Australia, might be a different-looking man from the Gordon who went to it."

"And would be, no doubt. But look here: Gorton was not disguised: Gordon would not dare to be in London without being so; his head's not worth a day's purchase. Fancy his walking about with only one letter in the name altered! Rely upon it, Mr. Carr, you are mistaken; Gordon would no more dare to come back and put his head into the lion's mouth than you'd jump into a pit of fire. He'd not be able to land without being dropped upon: that man was no common offender, and we've had our eyes open. And that's all," added the detective, after a pause. "Not very satisfactory to you, is it, Mr. Carr? But such as it is, I think you may rely upon it, spite of your own opinion. Meanwhile I'll keep myself on the look-out for Gorton, and tell you if he turns up."

The conference was over, and Mr. Green took his departure. Thomas Carr saw him out himself, and then returned to the room and sat down in a reverie.

"It's a curious tale," said Lord Hartledon.

"I'm thinking how the fact, now disclosed, of Gordon's being the same Gordon of that mutiny, affects you," remarked Mr. Carr.

"You believe him to be the same?"

"I see no reason to doubt it: on the contrary, every reason to believe it. It's not probable that two George Gordons should take their passage home in the Morning Star. Besides, it explains points that seemed unfathomable. I could not understand why you were not troubled by this man, but you may rely upon it

he has found it expedient to go into effectual hiding, and dare not yet come out of it. It is a *great* hold upon him, this fact; and if he turns round on you, you may keep him in check with it. Only let me alight upon him; I'll so frighten him as to cause him to ship himself off for life."

"I don't like that detective's having gone down to Calne," remarked Lord Hartledon.

Neither did Mr. Carr, especially if Gordon, or Gorton, should have got talkative on the score of "secrets," as there was reason to believe he had.

"Gordon is in England, and in hiding; probably in London, for there's no place where you may hide so effectually as in this great city. One thing I am astonished at: that he should show himself openly as George Gorton."

"Look here, Carr," said Lord Hartledon, leaning forward with his chin upon his hand; "I don't believe, in spite of you and the detective, that Gordon, our Gordon, was the one connected with the mutiny. I might possibly get a description of that man from Gum of Calne; for his son was coming home in the same ship — was one of those killed."

"Who's Gum of Calne?"

"The parish clerk. A respectable man as ever lived: you have seen Mirrable, our housekeeper; she's related to them. Gum went to Liverpool at the time, I know, and saw the remnant of the passengers that those pirates had spared; he was sure to hear a full description of Gordon. If ever I visit Hartledon again, I'll ask him."

"If ever you visit Hartledon again!" echoed Mr.

Carr. "Unless you go away entirely from the country — as I advise — you cannot help visiting Hartledon."

"Well, I'd almost as soon be hung!" cried the earl. "And now what is it that you want me for, and have kept me waiting here?"

Mr. Carr drew his chair nearer the earl. They alone knew their own troubles, and they sat talking long after the afternoon was over. Mr. Taylor came to the room; it was past his usual hour of departure.

"I suppose I can go, sir?"

"Not just yet," replied Mr. Carr.

Lord Hartledon took out his watch, and wondered whether it had been galloping, when he saw how late it was. "You'll come home and dine with me, Carr?"

"I'll follow you if you like," was the reply. "I have a matter or two to attend to first."

A few minutes of lingering, and the earl and his care went out. Mr. Carr called in his clerk.

"I want to know how you came to learn that the man I asked you about, Gordon, was employed by Kedge and Reck?"

"I heard it through a man of the name of Druitt," was the ready answer. "Happening to ask him — as I did several people — whether he knew any George Gordon, he at once said that a man of that name was at Kedge and Reck's, where Druitt himself had been temporarily employed."

"Ah," said Mr. Carr, remembering that this same Druitt had been mentioned to him. "But that man was called Gorton, not Gordon. You must have caught up the wrong name, Taylor. Or perhaps he misunderstood you. That's all; you may go."

The clerk departed. Mr. Carr took his hat and

followed him down; but before joining Lord Hartledon, he turned into the garden of the Temple, and strolled towards the river; the mouthful of fresh air — fresh to those hard-worked denizens of close and crowded London — seemed absolutely necessary to the barrister's heated brain.

He sat down on a bench facing the river, and bared his brow to catch what breeze there was. A cool head was his; never a cooler brought thought to bear upon perplexity; nevertheless it was not feeling very collected now. He could not reconcile sundry discrepancies in the trouble he was engaged in fathoming, and he saw no release whatever for Lord Hartledon.

"It has but complicated the affair," he said, as he watched the steamers up and down, "this calling in of Green the detective, and the news he's brought. Gordon, the Gordon of the mutiny! I don't like it: the other Gordon, simple enough and not bad-hearted, was easy to deal with in comparison; this man, pirate, robber, murderer, will stand at nothing. We should have a hold on him, it's true, in his own crime; but what's to prevent his keeping himself out of the way, and selling Hartledon to another? Why he has not sold him yet, I can't think. Unless from some cause he is waiting his time."

He put on his hat and began to count the barges on the other side, to banish thought. But it would not be banished, and he fell into the train again.

"Mair's behaving well; with Christian kindness; but it's bad enough to be even in *his* power. There's something in Lord Hartledon that he 'can't help loving,' he writes. Who can? Here am I, giving up my cir-

cuit — such a thing as never was heard of — and calling him friend still, and losing my rest o' nights for him! You'll defend me, Carr, should the necessity come, he says to me; and I'm afraid I should not only defend him, but stand at the bar with him hand-in-hand, metaphorically speaking. The Right Honourable the Earl of Hartledon arraigned for — Poor Val! poor Val! better that he had been the one to die!”

“Please, sir, could you tell us what the time is?”

The spell was broken, and Mr. Carr took out his watch as he turned his eyes on the questioner, a ragged urchin who had called out to him from below. The tide was low; and sundry Arabs were regaling their naked feet in the mud, sporting and shouting. The evenings drew in earlier than they did, and the sun had already set.

Quitting the garden, Mr. Carr stepped into a hansom, and was conveyed to Grafton Street. He found the earl knitting his brow over a letter.

“Maude is getting vexed in earnest,” he began, looking up at Mr. Carr. “She insists upon knowing the reason that I do not go home to her.”

“I don't wonder at it. You ought to do one of two things: go, or —”

“Or what, Carr?”

“You know. Never go home to her again.”

“I wish I was out of the world!” cried the unhappy earl.

CHAPTER V.

At Hartledon.

"HARTLEDON, — I wonder what you *think* of yourself, Galloping about *Rotten Row* with women when your wife's *dying*, Of *course* it's not your fault that reports of your goings-on *reach* her here oh dear no, You are a moddel husband you are, sending her down here *out of the way* that you may take your pleasure, Why did you *marry her*, nobody wanted you to she sits and *mopes* and *weeps* and she's going into the same way that her father *went*, you'll be glad no doubt to hear it it's what you're *aiming* at, once she is in *Calne churchyard* the *field* will be open for your Anne Ashton, I can tell you that if you've a spark of *propper feeling* you'll come *down* for it's killing her, Your wicked mother, "C. KIRTON."

The Earl of Hartledon turned this letter about in his hand. He scarcely noticed the mistake at the conclusion: the Dowager had doubtless intended to imply that *he* was wicked, and the slip of the pen in her temper went for nothing.

Galloping about Rotten Row with women! The earl cast his thoughts back, endeavouring to recollect what could have given rise to this charge. One morning, after a sleepless night, when he had tossed and turned on his uneasy bed, and risen unrefreshed, he hired a horse, for he had none in town, and went for a long

ride. Coming back, he turned into Rotten Row: he could not tell why he did so, for such places, affected by the gay, empty-headed votaries of fashion, were little consonant to his present state. He was barely in it when a lady's horse took fright; she was riding alone with a groom; Lord Hartledon gave her his assistance, led her horse until the animal was calm, and rode side by side with her to the end of the row. He knew not who she was; he scarcely noticed whether she was young or old; he had not given a remembrance to it since.

When your wife's dying! Accustomed to the strong expressions of the Countess Dowager, he passed that over. But "going into the same way that her father went," he paused there, and tried to remember how her father did "go." All he could recollect now, indeed all he knew at the time was, that the Earl of Kirton's death-sickness was reported to have been a lingering one.

Such missives as these — and the Countess Dowager favoured him with more than one — coupled with his own consciousness that he was not behaving to his wife as he ought, took him at length down to Hartledon. That his presence in the place, so soon after his marriage, was little short of an insult to Dr. Ashton's family, his sensitive feelings told him, and he would rather have gone to the opposite end of the globe; but his duty to his wife was paramount, and he could not visit his sin upon her.

She was looking very ill; she was low-spirited and hysterical; and with the sight of him she forgot all the anger her bosom had been nourishing, and fell sobbing into his arms. The Countess Dowager

had gone over to Garchester, and they had a few hours' peace.

"You are not looking well, Maude!"

"I know I am not. Why do you stay away?"

"I could not help myself," he murmured. "Business has kept me in London."

"Have *you* been ill also? You look thin and worn."

"One does get to look thin in heated London," he replied evasively, as he walked to the window and stood there. "How is your brother, Maude — Bob?"

"I don't want to talk of Bob yet; I have to talk to you," she said. "Percival, why did you practise that deceit upon me?"

"What deceit?"

"It was a downright falsehood; it made me look awfully foolish when I came here and spoke of it as a fact. That action."

Lord Hartledon made no reply. Here was one cause of his disinclination to meet his wife — the having to keep up the farce of Dr. Ashton's action. It seemed, however, that there would no longer be a farce to keep up. Had it exploded? He said nothing. Maude, gazing at him from the sofa on which she sat, her dark eyes looking larger than of yore, with hollow circles round them, waited for his answer.

"I do not know what you mean, Maude."

"You *do* know. You sent me down here with a tale that the Ashtons had entered an action against you for Breach of Promise — damages, ten thousand pounds —"

"Stay an instant, Maude. I did not 'send you

down' with the tale. I particularly requested you to keep it private."

"Well, mamma drew it out of me unawares. She vexed me with her comments about your staying on in London, and it made me tell why you stayed. She ascertained from Dr. Ashton that there was not a word of truth in the story. Val, I told it in your defence."

He stood at the window in silence, drawing in his lips.

"I looked so foolish in the eyes of Dr. Ashton! The Sunday evening after I came down here I had a sort of fainting-fit, coming home from church. He overtook me, and was very kind, and gave me his arm. I said a word to him; I could not help it; mamma had worried me on so; and I learned that no such action had ever been thought of. You had no right to subject me to the chance of such mortification. Why did you?"

Lord Hartledon came from the window and sat down near his wife, his elbow on the table. All he could do now was to make the best of it, and explain as near to the truth as he could.

"Maude, you must not expect full confidence on this subject, for I cannot give it you. When I found reason to believe that some — some legal proceedings were about to be instituted against me, just at the first intimation of the trouble, I thought it must emanate from Dr. Ashton. You took up the same notion of yourself, and I did not contradict it, simply because I could not tell you the real truth —"

"Yes," she interrupted. "It was the night that stranger called at our house, when you and Mr. Carr were closeted with him so long."

He could not deny it; but he had been thankful that she should forget the stranger and his visit. Maude waited.

"Then it was an action, but not brought by the Ashtons?" she resumed, finding he did not speak. "Mamma remarked that you were just the one to propose to half-a-dozen girls."

"It was not an action at all of that description; and I never proposed to any girl except Miss Ashton," he returned, nettled at the remark.

"Is it over?"

"Not quite;" and there was some hesitation in his tone. "Carr is settling it for me. I trust, Maude, you will never hear of it again — that it will never trouble you."

She sat looking at him with her wistful eyes.

"Won't you tell me its nature?"

"I cannot tell it you, Maude, believe me. I am as candid with you as it is possible for me to be; but there are some things best — best not spoken of. Maude," he repeated, rising upon impulse and taking both her hands in his, "do you wish to earn my love — my everlasting gratitude? Then you may do it by never more alluding to this."

It was a mistaken request; an altogether unwise emotion. Better that the earl had stayed on at the window, and drawled out a nonchalant denial. But he was apt to be as earnestly genuine on the surface as he was in reality. It set Lady Hartledon wondering; and she was more crafty than he, and resolved to "bide her time."

"As you please, of course, Val. But why should it agitate you?"

"I think I'm becoming a milksop," he answered; "many a little thing seems to agitate me now. I have not felt well of late; perhaps that's the cause."

"I think you might have satisfied me a little better. I expect it is some enormous debt risen up against you."

Better that she should think so! "I shall tide it over," he said aloud. "But indeed, Maude, I cannot bear for you delicate women to be brought into contact with these things; they are fit for us only. Think no more about it, and rely on me to keep trouble from you if it can be kept. Where's Bob? He is here, I suppose?"

"Bob's in his room. He is going into a way, I think. When he wrote and asked me if I would allow him to come here for a little change, the medical men saying he must have it, mamma was angry, and sent a refusal by return of post; she had had enough of Bob, she said, when he was here before. But I quietly wrote a note myself, and Bob came. He looked so ill, and he gets worse instead of better."

"What do you mean by saying he is going into a way?" asked Lord Hartledon, the words rather striking him.

"Consumption, or something of that. Papa died of it. You are not angry with me for keeping Bob?"

"Angry with you! My dear Maude, the house is yours; and if poor Bob stayed with us for ever, I should welcome him as a brother. Every body likes Bob."

"Except mamma. She does not like invalids in the house, and she has been saying you don't like it; that it was helping to keep you away. Poor Bob got

his portmanteau and began to pack his shirts; but I told him not to mind her; that he was my guest, not hers."

"And mine also, you might have added," said the earl.

He quitted the room, and went to the chamber which Captain Kirton had occupied when he was at Hartledon in the spring. It was empty, evidently not being used; and the earl, at a nonplus, called to Mirrable. She came, looking just as usual, wearing a dark-green silk gown; for the twelvemonth had expired, and the mourning for the late earl was over.

"Captain Kirton is in the small blue rooms facing south, my lord. They were warmer for him than these."

"Is he very ill, Mirrable?"

"Very, I think," was the answer. "Of course he may get better; but it does not look like it."

He was a tall, thin, handsome man, this young officer — a year or two older than Maude, whom he greatly resembled. Seated before a table, he was playing at "solitaire" — if any of you know that delectable game; and his eyes looked large and wild with surprise, and his cheeks became hectic, when Lord Hartledon entered.

"Bob, my dear fellow, I am glad to see you."

The earl took his hands and sat down, his face full of the concern he did not care to speak. Lady Hartledon had said he was going in a way: it was evidently the way of the grave.

He pushed the balls and the board from him, half ashamed of his employment. "To think that you should catch me at this!" he exclaimed. "Maude

brought it to me yesterday; she thought I was so dull."

"As good that as any thing else. I often think what a miserably restless invalid *I* should make. But now, what's amiss with you?"

"Well, I suppose it's the heart."

"The heart!"

"The doctors say so. No doubt they are right: those complaints are hereditary, and my father had it. I got quite unfit for duty, and they told me I must go away for change; so I wrote to Maude, and she took me in."

"Yes, yes; we are so glad to have you. We must try and cure you, Bob."

"Ah, I can't tell about that. He died of it, you know."

"Who?"

"My father. He was ill for some time, and it wore him to a skeleton, so that people thought he was in a decline. If I could only get sufficiently well to go back to duty, I should not mind; it is so sad to give trouble in a strange house."

"In a strange house it might be, but it would be ungrateful of you to call this one strange," returned Lord Hartledon, smiling on him from his pleasant blue eyes. "We must get you to town and have good advice for you. I suppose Hillary comes up?"

"Every day."

"Does *he* say it's heart-disease?"

"I believe he thinks it. It might be as much as his reputation is worth to say it in this house."

"How do you mean?"

"My mother won't have it said. She ignores the

disease altogether, and will not allow it to be mentioned, or hinted at. It's bronchitis, she tells every body; and of course bronchitis it must be. I did have a cough when I came: my chest is not strong."

"But why should she ignore heart-disease?"

"There was a fear that Maude would be subject to it when she was a little girl," answered Captain Kirton, taking up one of the crystal balls. "Should it be disclosed to her that it is my complaint, and were I to die of it, she might grow so alarmed for herself as to bring it on; and agitation, as we know, is often fatal in such cases."

Lord Hartledon sat in a sort of horror. Maude subject to heart-disease! when at any moment a certain fearful tale, of which he was the guilty centre, might be disclosed to her! Day by day, hour by hour, did he live in the dread of this story's being brought to light. This little unexpected communication increased that dread fourfold.

"Have I shocked you?" asked Captain Kirton. "It may be that I shall get the better of it yet."

"I believe I was thinking of Maude," answered the earl, slowly recovering from his stupor. "I never heard — I had no idea that Maude's heart was not perfectly sound."

"And I don't know but that it is sound; it was only a fancy when she was a child, and there might have been no real grounds for it. My mother is full of crotchets on the subject of illness; and says she'll not have any thing about heart-disease put into Maude's head. She is right, of course, so far, in using the precaution: so please remember that I am suffering

from any disorder but that," concluded the young officer, with a smile.

"How did yours first show itself?"

"Well, I hardly know. I used to be subject to sudden attacks of faintness: but I am not sure that they had any thing to do with the disease itself."

Just what Maude was becoming subject to! She had told him of a fainting-fit in London; she had told him of another now.

"I suppose the doctors warn you against sudden shocks, Bob?"

"More than against any thing. I am not to agitate myself in the least; I am not to run or jump, or go into a passion: they'd put me in a glass case that wouldn't open, if they could."

"Well, we'll see what skill can do for you," said the earl, rousing himself. "I wonder if a warmer climate would be of service to you? You might get to it without undue exertion, travelling cautiously and slowly."

"Couldn't think of it; couldn't afford it," was the ingenuous answer. "I have forestalled my pay as it is."

Lord Hartledon smiled. Never was there a more generous disposition than his; and if money would save this poor Bob Kirton, he certainly should not lack it.

Walking forth, he strolled down the road towards Calne, intending to ask a question or two of the surgeon. Time had been when Mr. Elster went forth, as you may remember, in an ignominy of tremor, looking to this side of the road, looking to that, lest missives from the Philistines should be awaiting him

in every tree: Lord Hartledon was in almost the same plight now, lest he should come unexpectedly on one of the Ashtons. Of course the feeling must be got over; and he accustom himself to meet them with equanimity. It was not so much that he disliked to meet them, as that he felt how painful it must be to them to meet him.

Mr. Hillary was at home. His house was situated at this end of Calne, just past the rectory and opposite the church, with an angular view of Clerk Gum's. The door was open, and Lord Hartledon strolled into the surgery unannounced, to the surprise of Mr. Hillary, who did not know he was at Calne.

The surgeon's opinion of Captain Kirton was not favourable. He had heart-disease beyond any doubt; and when Lord Hartledon asked what description of disease, there being several, the surgeon's explanation was delivered in technical terms, which his lordship scarcely cared to follow. His chest was weak also, the lungs not over-sound; altogether, the Honourable Robert Kirton's might be called a bad life.

"Would a warmer climate do any thing for him?" asked Lord Hartledon.

The surgeon shrugged his shoulders. "He'd be better there for some things than he is here. Yes, on the whole, perhaps it might temporarily benefit him."

"Then he shall go. And now, Hillary, I want to ask you something else — and you must answer me, mind. Captain Kirton tells me that the fact of his having heart-disease is not mentioned in the house lest it should alarm Lady Hartledon, and tend to

develop the same in her. Is there any foundation for this?"

"It is true that it's not spoken of; but I don't think there's any foundation for the fear."

"The old Dowager's as fanciful as she is high!" cried Lord Hartledon resentfully.

"A queer old — girl," remarked the surgeon, as if at fault for an epithet. "Can't help saying it, though she is your mother-in-law."

"I wish she was any body else's! She's as likely as not, in spite of her interdiction to you and Kirton, to let out something of this to Maude in her tantrums. But, Hillary, I don't believe a word of it; I never saw the least symptom of heart-disease in my wife."

"Nor I," said the doctor. "Of course I have not examined her for it; neither have I had much opportunity of ordinary observation."

"I wish you would contrive to get the latter. Come up often and call; make some excuse for seeing Lady Hartledon professionally, and watch her symptoms."

"I am seeing her professionally now. Not often; once or twice a week. She had one or two fainting-fits after she came down, and they called me in."

"Kirton says he used to have those fainting-fits," was the rather eager interruption. "Are they a symptom of heart-disease?"

"In Lady Hartledon I attribute them entirely to her present state of health. You are aware what that is, I presume?"

"Of course I am," was the impatient answer; and Mr. Hillary looked up, the words seemed to come out with such a burst of pain.

"I assure you, Lord Hartledon, I don't see the

slightest cause to fear that mischief of this sort is latent in your wife. She is of a calm temperament too; so far as I can observe."

"Well, you'll watch her as closely as you can get opportunity for; and if you *should* suspect any thing amiss — I cannot describe to you how this has startled me," broke off the earl. "I feel like a man who has had some horrible dark curtain suddenly spread before him; I could not rest till I came down to you. It's all right, I hope."

They stood talking for a minute at the door, when Lord Hartledon went out. Pike happened to pass on the other side the road.

"He is here still, I see," remarked the earl.

"O dear, yes; and likely to be."

"I wonder how the fellow picks up a living?"

The surgeon did not answer. "Are you going to make a long stay with us?" he asked.

"A very short one. I suppose you have had no return of that fever?"

"Not any. Calne never was more healthy than it is now. As I said to Dr. Ashton yesterday, but for his house I might put up my shutters and take a holiday."

"Who is ill at the rectory? Mrs. Ashton?"

"Mrs. Ashton is not strong, but she's better than she was last year. I have been more concerned for Anne than for her."

"Is *she* ill?" cried Lord Hartledon, his throat giving a sort of gulp.

"Ailing. But it's an ailing I do not like."

"What's the cause?" he rejoined, feeling as if some other crime were about to be brought home to him.

"That's a question I never inquire into. I put it upon the air of the rectory," added the surgeon, in a jesting tone, "and tell them they ought to get away from it for a time, but they have been away too much of late to go again, they say. She's getting over it somewhat, and I take care that she goes abroad and gets exercise. What has it been? you ask, Lord Hartledon. Well, no disease in particular; a sort of inward fever, with bright cheeks and unequal spirits. It takes time for these things to be got over, you know. The rector has been any thing but well, too; he is not the strong healthy man he was."

"And all *my* work; my work!" cried the earl to himself, nearly gnashing his teeth as he went back down the street. "What *right* had I to upset the happiness of that family? I wish it had pleased God to take me first! My father used to say that some men seem born into the world only to be a blight; it's what I have been, heaven knows."

He knew, as well as though the surgeon had said it to him in so many words, that Anne Ashton was suffering from the shock caused by his conduct. The love of these quiet, sensitive, refined natures, once awakened, is not given for a day, but for all time; it becomes a part of existence; and it cannot be riven but by an effort that brings destruction to even future hope of happiness. Not even Mr. Hillary, not even Dr. and Mrs. Ashton, could discern the real misery that was the daily portion of Anne. She strove to hide it all; she went about the house carolling songs, and wore a bright face when people were looking at her, and dressed well, and was especially careful with her hair, and laughed with guests and went abroad, as the sur-

geon had called it, in the parish to the poor and the rich, and was altogether gay. Ah, do you know what it is, this assumption of gaiety when the heart is breaking? — this mortal fear lest those about you, father, mother, brothers, sisters, servants, should detect the truth? Have *you* ever lived with this mask upon your face? — which can only be thrown off at night in the privacy of your own chamber, when you may abandon yourself to your blank desolation, and fling your arms aloft to heaven, praying to be taken, or to have increased strength to *live* and *bear*? My friends, it may seem a light thing, this state of heart that I am telling you of — a sort of romance on fiction's page; but it has killed both men and women, for all that; and killed them in silence.

Anne Ashton had never complained. She did every thing that she had used to do, and was particular about all her duties, and was growing quite unnaturally gay; but a disagreeable nervous cough attacked her, and her frame grew thin, and her cheeks hectic. Try as she would, she could not eat: all she confessed to, when questioned by Mrs. Ashton, was "a pain in her throat;" and Mr. Hillary was called in. Anne laughed at him: there was nothing at all the matter with her, she said, and her throat was better; she had strained it perhaps. The doctor was a wise doctor; his professional visits were given over to gossip; and as to medicine, he just sent her a tonic, and told her to take it or not as she pleased. Time, time, he said to Mrs. Ashton, — she'd be all right in time; the summer heat was making her feel languid.

The summer heat had nearly passed now, and perhaps some of the heat of battle was passing with it.

None knew — let me repeat it — what that battle had been; none ever can know, unless they go through it for themselves. In Miss Ashton's case there was a feature that some are spared — her love had been known — and it increased the anguish tenfold: it was the worst part of the pain. She would overcome it if she could only forget him; but it would take time to do that; would come out of it an altogether different woman, with her best hope in life gone, and her heart dead and worthless.

"What brought him down here?" mentally questioned Mr. Hillary, in an explosion of vexation, as he watched his visitor along the street. "It will undo for her all that I have been doing. He and his wife too might have had the grace to keep away for this year. I did love him once, with all his faults; do still; but I'd like to see him in the pillory, for all that. It has told on him also, if I'm any reader of looks. And now, Miss Anne, you go off from Calne to-morrow an' I can prevail; and I only hope you'll not see him meanwhile."

CHAPTER VI.

Under the Trees.

It was the same noble-looking man Calne had ever known, going down the road there — called by courtesy a street — and returning the greetings offered him; his word was as affable, his nod as kindly, his dark-blue eyes as radiantly earnest as they had been in the old days. Lord Hartledon was not a whit less attractive than the Val Elster who had won golden love from all. To look at his courtly self there, the free action of his step, his head bending a return-greeting to one and another, his smile sweet as of yore, none would have believed that the cowardly monster, Fear, was for ever feasting on his heart.

He came to a standstill opposite the clerk's house, looked at it for a moment, as if deliberating whether he should enter then or at another opportunity, and crossed the road. The twilight of the evening had begun to draw on while he talked with the surgeon. As he advanced up the clerk's garden, somebody wearing a bonnet and shawl, with hanging hair, came out of the house with a bang, and ran right against him.

"Take care," he lazily said.

"What for, then, d'ye butt at a body like that?" was the retort.

"Well, I fancy the butting was on the other side," quoth Lord Hartledon, carelessly free, as usual.

The girl — it was no other than Miss Rebecca Jones — stared up through her streaming black hair, and shrunk away when she recognised her antagonist, muttering some sort of an apology. Flying through the gate with another bang, she went scuttering up the street, and Lord Hartledon gained the house. Miss Rebecca's fierce exit had caused the door to rebound, and he made his way in without ceremony. At a table in the little parlour sat the clerk's wife, presiding at a solitary tea-table by light of a candle, for it was darker indoors than out.

"How are you, Mrs. Gum?"

She had not heard him enter, and started at the salutation, dropping the sugar-basin on the board with a cry. Lord Hartledon laughed.

"Don't take me for a housebreaker, Mrs. Gum. Your front door was open, and I came in without ceremony. Is your husband at home?"

What with shaking and curtseying, Mrs. Gum could scarcely stand to answer. It was surprising how a little shock of this kind, or indeed of any kind, would make her shake. Gum was away on some business or other of his, she replied — which was the cause of their tea-hour being delayed, — but she expected him in every moment. Would his lordship please to wait in the best parlour, she asked, taking the candle to show him into the state sitting-room.

No; his lordship would not go into the best parlour; he'd wait two or three minutes where he was, provided she did not disturb herself, and went on with her tea.

Mrs. Gum dusted a large old-fashioned oak chair

with her apron; but he perched himself sideways on one of its high elbows.

"And now do you drink your tea, Mrs. Gum, and I'll look on with all the envy of a thirsty man."

Mrs. Gum glanced up tremblingly at the words. Might she dare to offer a cup to his lordship? She'd not make so bold but for the intimation of thirst: tea *was* refreshing to a dry throat.

"And mine's always dry," he returned, with the impulsive truth that characterised him. "I'll drink some with you, and thank you for it. It won't be the first time, will it?"

"Always dry!" remarked Mrs. Gum. "Maybe you've got a touch of in'nard fever, my lord. Many folks do get it at the close of summer."

Lord Hartledon sat on the chair-elbow, and drank down his tea at a draught. He said well that he was always thirsty, though Mrs. Gum's unconscious expression of the parched throat was the better one. That timid matron, nearly done over by the honour accorded her — for the Earl of Hartledon was no longer young Val Elster — sat on the edge of her chair, cup in hand, and raised a deprecating spoonful to her lips now and then.

"I want to ask your husband if he can give me a description of the man who was concerned in that wretched mutiny on board the Morning Star," said Lord Hartledon somewhat abruptly. "I mean the ringleader, Gordon. He — What's the matter?"

Mrs. Gum had jumped up out of her chair. She began looking about the room. The cat, or something else, had "rubbed against her legs."

No cat could be found, and she took her seat

again edgeways as before, her teeth chattering. Lord Hartledon came to the private conclusion that she was fit for a lunatic asylum. Why did she keep a cat, if its fancied rubbing against her legs could terrify her like that?

"It was said, you know — at least it has been always assumed — that Gordon did not come back to England," he continued, speaking openly of his business, where a more prudent man would have kept his lips closed. "But I have reason to believe that he did come back, Mrs. Gum; and I wish to find him."

Mrs. Gum wiped her face. It was covered with drops of water as large as peas.

"Gordon never did come back, I am sure, sir," she said, forgetting all about titles in her trepidation.

"You don't know that he did not. You may think it; the public may think it; what's of more moment to Gordon, the police may think it: but you can't *know* it. I know he did."

"My lord, he did not; I could — I almost think I could be upon my oath he did not," she answered, gazing out at Lord Hartledon with frightened eyes and white lips, which, to say the truth, rather puzzled that nobleman, and he gazed back again from his side-perch on the chair.

"Will you tell me why you assert so confidently that Gordon did not come back?"

She could not tell, and she knew she could not.

"I can't bear to hear him spoke of, my lord," she said. "He — he — we look upon him as my poor boy's murderer," she broke off with a sob; "and it is not likely I could."

Not very logical; but Lord Hartledon allowed for confusion of ideas consequent on distress.

"I don't like to speak of him any more than you can like to hear," he said kindly. "Indeed I am sorry to have grieved you; but if the man is in London, and can be traced —"

"In London!" she interrupted.

"He was in London last autumn, as I believe — was living there."

An expression of relief passed over her features, perceptible to Lord Hartledon.

"I should not like to hear of his coming a-nigh us," she sighed, dropping her voice to a whisper, as if the man could listen to her. "London: that's pretty far off."

"And yet he" — the incautious words were arrested on his lips — "has been at Calne," they would have run; but it was by no means expedient for his, Lord Hartledon's own sake, as he too well knew, to lead any one definitely on the track of George Gordon.

"I suppose you are anxious to bring him to justice, Mrs. Gum?"

"No, sir, not now; neither me nor Gum," she replied, shaking her head. "Time was, sir — my lord — that I'd have walked barefoot to see him hung; but the years have gone by; and if the sorrow's not dead, it's less keen, and we'd be thankful to let the past rest in peace. O my lord, *don't* rake him up!"

The wild, imploring accent of the words quite startled Lord Hartledon.

"You need not fear," he said after a pause. "I

do not care to see Gordon hung, either; and though I want to trace his present abode — if it can be traced — it is not with a view of injuring him.”

“But my husband and me don’t know his abode, my lord,” she rejoined in faint remonstrance.

“I did not suppose you knew it. All I want to ask your husband is, to give me the description of Gordon. I wish to see if it tallies with — with some one I once knew,” he cautiously concluded. “Perhaps you remember what the man was said to be like?”

She put her fingers up to her brow, leaning her elbow on the table. He could not help observing how the fingers shook.

“I think it was said that he had red hair —” she began after a long pause; “and was — tall, was it? either tall or short; one of the two. And his eyes — his eyes were dark eyes of some shade, either brown or blue.”

Lord Hartledon could not avoid a smile. “That’s no description at all.”

“My memory is not over good, my lord: I read his description in the handbills offering the reward; and that’s some time ago now.”

“The handbills! — to be sure!” interrupted Lord Hartledon, springing from his perch. “I never thought of them; they’ll give me the best description. Do you know where —”

The conference was interrupted by the clerk. He came in with a large book in his hand; and a large dog, which belonged to a friend, and had followed him home. For a minute or two there was only bustle, for the dog was leaping upon every thing and

every body. Lord Hartledon then said a few words of explanation, and the quiet demeanour of the clerk, as he calmly listened, was in marked contrast to the nervous agitation of his wife.

"Might I inquire your lordship's reasons for thinking that Gordon came back?" he quietly asked, when Lord Hartledon had ceased.

"I cannot give them you in detail, Gum. That he did come back, there is no doubt whatever, though how he succeeded in eluding the vigilance of the police, who were watching for him, is curious. His coming back, however, is not the question: I thought you might be able to give me a close description of him: I knew you went to Liverpool when the unfortunate passengers got in."

But Clerk Gum was unable to give any satisfactory response. No doubt he had heard enough of what Gordon was like at the time, he observed, but it had not rested on his memory. A fair man, he thought he was described, with light hair. He had heard nothing of Gordon since; didn't want to, if his lordship would excuse his saying it; firmly believed he was at the bottom of the sea.

Patient, respectful, apparently candid, he spoke, attending his guest, hat in hand, to the outer gate, when it pleased that nobleman to take his departure. But, take it for all in all, there remained a certain doubtful feeling on the Earl of Hartledon's mind, in regard to the interview; for some subtle discernment had whispered to him that both Gum and his wife could have given him the description of Gordon, and would not.

He turned slowly towards home, thinking of this.

As he passed the waste ground, and Pike's shed, he cast his eyes towards it; a curl of smoke was ascending from the chimney-pipe, discernible still in the dusk of the evening. It occurred to Lord Hartledon that this man, who had the character of being so lawless, and seemed to live upon air and a loaf of bread a-day, which a baker left, and mostly set down outside the door, had been rather suspiciously and unaccountably intimate with the man Gordon. Not perhaps that the struck-up intimacy was suspicious in itself; birds of a feather flock together; but the most simple and natural thing connected with Gordon would have borne suspicion for the earl's mind now.

He had barely passed the gate when some shouting arose in the road behind him. A man, driving a cart recklessly, had nearly come in contact with another cart, and there ensued some hard language. Lord Hartledon turned his head quickly, and just caught Mr. Pike's head, propelled a little over the top of the gate, watching him. He must have been crouched down in hiding when Lord Hartledon passed. The earl went back at once; and Pike put a bold face on the matter, and stood up.

"So you occupy your palace still, Pike?"

"Such as it is. Yes."

"I half-expected to find that Mr. Marris had turned you from it," continued Lord Hartledon, alluding to his steward.

"He'd not do it, *I* expect, without your lordship's orders; and I don't fancy you'll give 'em," was the free answer.

"I think my brother would have given such, had he lived."

"But he didn't live," rejoined Pike. "He wasn't let live."

"How do you mean?" asked Lord Hartledon, catching at the words.

Pike twitched off a bit of thorn from the low-growing hedge behind the hurdle-fence, and began biting it. "'Twas nearly a smash," he said, looking at the two carts now proceeding on their different ways with a final interchange of compliments. "That cart of Floyd's is always in hot water: man drinks; Floyd turned him off once."

Lord Hartledon had not observed that it was the miller's cart; he looked after it now with the slight, transient interest felt in passing things by an unoccupied man. It was jogging up the road towards home, under convoy of the offending driver; the boy, David Ripper, sitting inside on some empty sacks, and looking over the tail-board behind: looking very hard indeed, as it seemed, in their direction. Mr. Pike appropriated the gaze.

"Yes, you may stare, young Rip!" he apostrophised, nodding his head as if the boy could hear him; "but you won't stare yourself out o' my hands. You're the biggest liar in Calne — a regular arch-fiend for deceit; but you don't mislead me."

"Pike, when you made acquaintance with that man Gordon — you remember him?" broke off Lord Hartledon.

"Yes, I do," said Pike emphatically.

"Did he make you acquainted with any of his private affairs? — his past history?"

"Not a word on't," answered Pike, looking still after the cart and the boy, in his ill manners.

"Were those fine whiskers of his false? and that red hair?"

Pike turned his head quickly. The question had aroused him.

"False hair and whiskers!" he exclaimed. "I never knew 'twas the fashion to wear such."

"Convenience gives rise to the custom sometimes, if fashion does not," observed Lord Hartledon, his tone one of cynical meaning; and Mr. Pike surreptitiously peered at him from his small light eyes.

"If Gorton's hair was false, I never noticed it, that's all; I never saw him without a hat, that I remember, except in that inquest-room."

"Had he been to Australia?"

Pike paused to take another surreptitious gaze.

"Can't say. Never heard."

"Was his name Gorton, or Gordon? Come, Pike," continued Lord Hartledon good-humouredly, "there's a sort of mutual alliance between you and me; you did me a service once unasked, and I allow you to live free and undisturbed on my ground. I think you *do* know something of this man; it is a fancy I have taken up."

"I never knew his name was any thing but Gorton," said Pike carelessly; "never heard it nor thought it."

"Did you happen to hear him speak ever of that mutiny on board the Australian ship, Morning Star? You have heard of it, I daresay: a George Gordon was the ringleader."

If ever the cool impudence was suddenly taken out of a man, this question seemed to take Pike's out of

him. He did not speak for some time; and when he did, it was in a very low and humble tone.

"My lord, I hope you'll pardon my rough thoughts and ways, which haven't been used to noblemen — and the sight of that Rip of a boy put me up, for reasons of my own. As to Gorton — I never did hear him speak of the thing you mention. His name's Gorton, and nothing else, as far as I know; and his hair's his own, for all I saw."

"He did not give you his confidence, then?"

"No, never. Not about himself nor any thing else, past or present."

"And did not let a word slip? As to — for instance, as to his having been a passenger on board the Morning Star at the time of the mutiny?"

Pike had moved a step away, and stood with his arms on the hurdles, his head bent sideways on them, as if he were gazing after some object up the road; thus his face was turned from Lord Hartledon, and from the lighter quarter of the heavens where the sun had set.

"Gorton said nothing to me. As to that mutiny — I think I read something about it in the newspapers, but I forget what. I was just getting up from some weeks' bed of rheumatic fever at the time; I'd caught it working in the fields; and news don't leave much impression in sickness. Gorton never spoke of it to me. I never heard him say who he was or what he was; and I couldn't speak truer if your lordship offered me the shed for my own as a bribe."

"Do you know where Gordon might be found at present?"

"I swear before Heaven that I know nothing of

the man; that I've never heard of him since he went away," cried Pike, with a burst of either passion or fear. "He was as a stranger to me when he came, and he was as a stranger when he went. I found out the little game he had come about, and I saved your lordship from his clutches, which he doesn't know to this day. I know nothing else about him at all."

"Well, good evening, Pike. You need not put yourself out for nothing."

He walked away, taking leave of the man as civilly as though he had been a respectable member of society. It was not in Val's nature to show discourtesy to any living being. Why Pike should have shrunk from the questions, he could not tell; but that he did shrink was evident; perhaps from a surly dislike to be questioned at all; but on the whole Lord Hartledon thought he had spoken the truth as to knowing nothing of Gordon.

Crossing the road, he struck into the field-path near the rectory; it was a trifle nearer than the roadway, and he was in a hurry, for he had not thought to ask at what hour his wife dined, and might be keeping her waiting. The dark shade, cast by the overhanging trees in this lovely path, was almost like night, after the still light road on which the fading glow from the west was shining.

Who was this Pike? he went along thinking; as he had done before now. When the man was off his guard, the rough speech and demeanour were not so conspicuous; and the tone took a certain refinement that seemed to say he had been some time in civilised society. Again, how did he live? A tale was told in Calne of Pike's having been disturbed at supper one

night by a parcel of rude boys who had seen a luxurious table; hot steak and a piece of pudding. They were not believed, certainly; but still Pike must live; and how did he find the means? Why did he live there at all? — what had caused him to come to Calne? — Who —

These reflections might have lasted all the way home but for an interruption. An interruption that drove every thought out of Lord Hartledon's mind, and sent the heart's blood coursing swiftly through his veins. Turning a corner of the dark winding path, he came suddenly upon a lady seated on a bench, so close to the narrow path that he could not but touch her in passing. She seemed to have sat down for a moment to do something to her hat, which was lying in her lap, her hands busied with it.

A faint cry escaped her, and she rose up. It was caused partly by emotion, partly by surprise at the sight of him, for she did not know he was within a hundred miles of the place. And it is very probable that she would have liked to box her own ears for showing any. The hat fell off her knees as she rose, and both stooped for it.

"Forgive me," he said. "I fear I have startled you."

"I am waiting for papa; I walked on," she answered, in hasty apology for being found there. And Lord Hartledon, casting his eyes onwards some considerable distance, discerned the indistinct forms of two persons talking together. He understood the situation at once. Dr. Ashton and his daughter had been to the cottages; and the doctor had halted on their return

road to speak to a day-labourer going home from his work, Anne walking slowly on.

And there they stood face to face, Anne Ashton and her deceitful lover! How their hearts beat to pain, how utterly oblivious they were of every thing else in life save each other's presence, how tumultuously confused were mind and manner, to the forgetting of surface-propriety, both might remember afterwards, but certainly were not conscious of then. It was a little glimpse of Eden; a corner of the dark curtain thrown between them had raised itself, and so unexpectedly, that for the moment nothing else was discernible in the dazzling light.

Forget! Not in that instant of sweet confusion, during which nothing seemed more real than a dream. He was the husband of another; she was parted from him for ever; and neither was capable of deliberate thought or act that could intrench on the position, or tend to return, of design, even momentarily to the past. And yet there they stood with beating hearts, and eyes that betrayed their own tale — that the marriage and the parting were in one sense but a hollow mockery, that their love was indelible as of old. It's very wrong to have these feelings; we all know it; very sinful and very inconvenient; and yet — there they are. Where's the use of preaching? human nature is human nature; and warm feelings that ought to lie dead and buried, rise out of their grave now and again, as if to mock our own better selves. Try as we will to keep love down — love that ought not to be — with pride and efforts and prayers and tears, it is sure to assert itself in some unguarded moment.

Forget! Each had been "forgetting" to the utmost

of the poor power within, and in accordance with the high principles enshrined in either heart. What a mockery that forgetting seemed, now that it was laid before them naked and bare! Forget, while the heart turned sick to faintness at the bare sight of each other! while the hands trembled at the mutual touch, and the wistful eyes shone with a glance that too surely spoke of love!

But not a word of this was spoken. However true the hearts might be, however manifest the self-consciousness of manner, there was no fear of the tongue following up the error. Lord Hartledon would no more have allowed himself to speak than she to listen; regret he might tell of; not of continuous, and — now — sinful love. Neither had the hands met in ordinary salutation; it was only when he resigned the hat to her that the fingers touched: a touch light, transient, all but imperceptible; nevertheless it sent a thrill through the whole frame. Not exactly knowing what to do in her confusion, Miss Ashton sat down on the bench again and put her hat on.

"I must say a word to you before I go on my way," said Lord Hartledon. "I have been wishing for such a meeting as this ever since I saw you at Versailles; and indeed I think I wished for nothing else before it. When you think of me as one utterly heartless — and you have no doubt every right to do it —"

"Stay, Lord Hartledon," she interrupted with white lips. "I cannot listen to you. You must be aware that I cannot, and ought not. What are you thinking of?"

"I know that I have forfeited all right to ask you —"

that it is an unpardonable intrusion my presuming even to accost you. Well, perhaps, you are right," he added, after a moment's pause; "it may be better that I should not say what I was hoping to say. It cannot mend existing things; it cannot undo the past. I dare not ask for your forgiveness: it would seem too much like an insult; nevertheless, I would rather have it than any earthly gift. Fare you well, Anne! I shall sometimes hear of your happiness."

"Have you been ill?" she asked in a kindly impulse, noticing his looks in that first calm moment.

"No — not as the world would count illness. If remorse and shame and repentance can be called illness, I have my share: ill deeds of more kinds than one are coming home to me. Anne," he added in a hoarse whisper, "his face working with emotion, "if there is one corner of light in my heart, where all else is very dark, it is caused by thankfulness to Heaven that you were spared."

"Spared!" she echoed, in wonder at the word's meaning, and so completely awed by his strange words and manner as to forget her reserve.

"Spared the linking your name to mine. I thank God for it, for your sake, night and day. Had trouble fallen on you through me, I don't think I could have borne it. May you be shielded from all such for ever!"

He turned abruptly away, and she looked after him, her heart beating a great deal louder than it ought. That she was his best and dearest love, in spite of his marriage, it was impossible not to see; and she strove to think him very wicked for it, and her cheek was red with a feeling that seemed akin to

shame. But — trouble? — thankful for her sake, night and day, that her name was not linked to his? He must allude to debt, she supposed: some of those old embarrassments had augmented themselves into burdens, too heavy to bear with safety.

The rector was coming on now at a swift pace. He looked keenly at Lord Hartledon; looked twice, as if in surprise. A flush rose to Val's sensitive face as he passed, and lifted his hat. The rector, dark and proud, condescended to return the courtesy: and the meeting was over.

Toiling across Lord Hartledon's path was the labourer to whom the rector had been speaking. He had an empty bottle slung over his shoulder, and carried a sickle. The man's hard day's work was over, and had left fatigue behind it.

"Good-night to your lordship!"

"Is it you, Ripper?"

He was the father of the young gentleman in the cart, whom Mr. Pike had not long before treated to his opinion: young David Ripper, the miller's boy. Old Ripper, a talkative and discontented man, stopped and ventured to enter on his sorrows and grievances to the earl, just as he had been enlarging on them to Dr. Ashton. His wife had been a-pledging of things to pay for a fine gownd she'd bought; his two girls was down with measles; his son, young Rip, plagued his life out.

"How does he plague your life out?" asked Lord Hartledon, when he had listened patiently.

"A-saying he'll go off and enlist for a soldier, my

lord; he's a-saying of it always: and he means it too, only he's over-young for't."

"Over-young for it; I should think he is over-young for it. Why, he's not much more than a child. Our sergeants don't enlist little boys."

"Sometimes he says he'll drownd hisself, by way of a change," returned old Ripper.

"O, does he! Folks that say it never do it. I should whip it out of him."

"He have never been the same since the lord's death that time. He's always frightened: gets a fancy-ing things, and saying sometimes he sees his shadder."

"Who's shadow?"

"His'n: your lordship's brother's."

"Why does he fancy that?" came the question, after a perceptible pause.

Old Ripper shook his head. 'Twas beyond his sense to know, he said. "There be only two things he's afeard on in life," continued the man, who, though called old Ripper very generally, was not above five-and-thirty. "The one's that wild man Pike; t'other's the shadder: he'd run ten mile sooner nor see either."

"Does Pike annoy the boy?"

"Never spoke to him, as I knows on, my lord. Afore that drownding of his lordship last year, Davy was the boldest and stockiest rip going," added the man, who had long ago fallen into the epithet applied popularly to his son. "Since then he don't dare say his soul's his own. We had him laid up afore the winter, and I know 'twere nothing but fear."

Lord Hartledon could not make much of the story, and had no time to linger. Administering a word of general encouragement, he continued his way, his thoughts going back to the interview with Anne Ashton, and a line or two of Longfellow's "Fire of Driftwood" rising up in his mind —

"Of what had been and might have been,
And who was changed, and who was dead."

CHAPTER VII.

Breakfast with the Dowager.

THE Dowager Countess of Kirton stood in the sunny breakfast room at Hartledon, surveying the well-spread table with complacency; for it appeared to be rather more elaborately set out than usual, and nobody living loved good cheer better than she. When she saw two cups and saucers on the cloth instead of one, it occurred to her that Maude must, by caprice, be coming down to the meal, which she had not done of late. The Countess Dowager had arrived at midnight from Garchester, in consequence of having missed the earlier train, and found nearly all the house gone to bed. She was in a furious humour, and nobody had told her of the arrival of the earl: nobody ever did tell her any more than they were obliged; for she was not held in estimation at Hartledon.

"Potted tongue," she exclaimed, dodging round the table, lifting the covers, and looking and sniffing. "A raised pie; I wonder what's in it? And whatever's that stuff in jelly? it looks delicious. This is through the blowing-up I gave to Hedges the other day; nothing like finding fault. There's hot dishes coming up too, for the stands are on the table. I suppose Maude gave out that she should be down this morning. Such idleness — her lying in bed! It's all rubbish, her fancying she's ill: she's as well and hearty as I am, and she takes and gives way like a sim—a-a-a-ah!"

The conclusion was a sort of scream, caused by the entrance of the earl. She was just in the act of conveying surreptitiously some delicious morsel cribbed from a dish to her mouth on the end of a fork. It was arrested midway; and the mouth opened to receive it, remained open from consternation.

"How are you, Lady Kirton?"

"Where on earth did you spring from?"

"From my room," said the earl.

She went round to her seat rather chopfallen. To say nothing of being caught at the little interlude of the fork, she was also caught in a costume that was, to say the least of it, not becoming: a washed-out old buff dressing-gown, with torn frills and short in the skirts, and a night-cap with a flapping border. Expecting no company but herself, and not caring for Hedges, to whom she had got used, the Countess Dowager had thus descended. She was a wretchedly vain old woman still; and to be seen thus by a young and attractive man was any thing but satisfactory, although he was her son-in-law.

"What's the good of your appearing before people like a ghost, Hartledon? When did you arrive?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"Ugh! And time you did, I think, with your poor wife fretting herself to death for you. How is she this morning?"

"Very well."

"Ugh!" You must please to imagine this sound, something between a grunt and a groan, that the estimable lady gave vent to whenever put out. It is not capable of being written. "You might have sent

word you were coming. I should think you frightened your wife to death."

"Not quite."

He walked across the room and rang the bell; taking, as it were, the executive out of the Dowager's hands. Hedges brought in the breakfast. It had been the Dowager's pleasure that nobody else should serve her at that meal — perhaps on account of these peculiarities of costume.

She slipped out of the room, and came back with her night-cap off and a green turban on. The toilette had been hurried, and the false front fell too much over her nose, and the cheeks were red in the wrong place. She never looked so cunningly keen as in these moments: her forehead (what there was of it) hidden, her little eyes peering out from under the brows.

"Will you be so kind as pour out the coffee in Maude's place to-day, Lady Kirton? She has promised to get up another morning."

It was making her so entirely into a guest, and intentionally she thought, that Lady Kirton did not like it. Not only did she fully intend Lord Hartledon's home to be her home, but she meant to be the one ruling power in it. Keep Maude just now to her sick fancies, and later to her round of gay life, and there'd be little fear of her asserting her independence.

"Are you in the habit of setting out this sort of breakfast, Hedges?" asked the earl; for what with the cold dishes and the hot, the board looked like an elaborate dinner.

"We have made some difference, my lord, this morning."

"For me, I suppose. You need not do so in future. I have got out of the habit of eating breakfast; and if I ate it ever so, I don't want this sort of display. Captain Kirton gets up later, I presume."

"He's hardly ever up before eleven," said Hedges. "But he makes a good breakfast, my lord."

"That's all right. Tempt him with any delicacy you can devise. He wants strength."

The Dowager was fuming. "Don't you think I'm capable of regulating these things, Hartledon, I'd beg leave to ask?"

"O, no doubt. I beg you will make yourself at home while you stay with us. — I should like some tea, Hedges."

She could have thrown the coffee-pot at him. There was incipient independence in his every movement; there was latent war in his look. He was no more the puppet in her hands that he had been; the day was gone by for ever.

Perhaps Val could not himself have explained the feeling that was this morning working within him. It was the first time he and the Dowager had met since the marriage, and the sight of her brought before him all too prominently the ill-omened past: her unjustifiable scheming — his own miserable weakness. If ever Lord Hartledon felt shame and repentance for that weak yielding of his, he felt it now — felt it in all its bitterness; and something very like rage against the Dowager was bubbling up in his spirit, which he had some ado to suppress.

He did suppress it, however, though it rendered

him less courteous than usual; and the meal proceeded partly in silence; an interchanged word, civil on the surface, passing now and then. The Dowager enjoyed herself and eat away as usual, and had little leisure, while the eating lasted, for any thing else.

"What makes you take nothing?" she asked, perceiving at length that he had only a piece of toast on his plate, and was playing with that.

"I am not hungry."

"These mushrooms are delicious; so are the kidneys."

"They look good."

"Have you left off eating breakfast?"

"I have not felt much appetite for it lately."

"What has taken your appetite?"

The earl slightly raised his eyebrows, and balanced his tea-spoon on the edge of his cup. "One can't eat much in the heat of summer."

"Heat of summer! it's nothing more than autumn now. And you are as thin as a weasel too. Take and try that raised pie."

"Do let me and my appetite alone, Lady Kirton. If I wanted any thing, I should take it."

"Let you alone! yes, of course! — You don't want it to be noticed that you are out of sorts," snapped the Dowager. "*I* know the signs — turning at good food and swilling down all that tea. You've been raking and racketing about London with a heap of fast men — that's what you've been at."

The "raking and racketing about London" presented so complete a contrast to the lonely life of care

and anxiety he had really passed, that the earl smiled in very bitterness. And the smile incensed the Dowager, for she misunderstood it.

"It's early days to begin! I don't think you ought to have married Maude."

"I don't think I ought."

She did not expect the rejoinder, and dropped her knife and fork. "Why *did* you marry her?"

"Nay — perhaps you can tell that better than I."

The Countess Dowager pushed up her hair. "Are you going to throw off the mask outright, and become a bad husband as well as a neglectful one?"

He rose from his seat and went to the window, which was open to the ground. He did not wish to quarrel with her if he could help it. Lady Kirton raised her voice.

"Staying away, as you have, in London, and leaving Maude here to pine alone."

"Business kept me in London."

"I daresay it did!" cried the wrathful Dowager. "If Maude died of ennui, you'd not care. She can't go about much herself just now, poor thing! I *wish* Edward had lived."

"I wish he had, with all my heart!" came the answer; and the tone struck surprise on the Dowager's ear — it was so full of pain. "Maude's coming to Hartledon without me was her own doing," he remarked. "I wished her not to come."

"I daresay you did, as her heart was set upon it. The fact of her wishing to do a thing would be the signal for your opposing it; I've gathered that much. My advice to Maude is, to assert her own will, irrespective of yours."

"Don't you think, Lady Kirton, that it may be as well if you let me and my wife alone? We shall get along, no doubt, without interference; *with* interference we might not."

What with one thing and another, the Dowager's temper was inflammable that morning; and when it got into that undesirable state she was apt to say pretty free things, even for her.

"Edward would have made her the better husband."

"But she didn't like him, you know!" spoke the earl, his eyes flashing with the reminiscence of an old thought; and the Countess Dowager took the sentence to be spoken literally, and not ironically.

"Ah! not like him. If you had had eyes as Val Elster, you'd have seen whether she liked him or not. She was dying for him — not for you."

The earl made no reply. It was only what he had suspected, in a half-doubting sort of way, at the time. A little spaniel, that belonged to one of the gardeners, ran up and licked his hand.

"The time that I had of it!" continued the Dowager; her nose getting redder and redder as her temper got up. "But for me, Maude never would have been forced into having you. And she *shouldn't*, if I'd thought you were going to turn out like this."

He wheeled round and faced her; his pale face working with emotion, but his voice subdued to calmness. Lady Kirton's last words halted on her tongue, for his look startled even her, in its resolute sternness.

"To what end are you saying this, madam? You know perfectly well that you almost moved heaven

and earth, scheming to get me: *you*, I say; I prefer to leave my wife's name out of this: and I fell into the snare. I have not complained of my bargain; so far as I know, Maude has not: but if it be otherwise — if she and you repent of the union, I am willing to dissolve it, as far as it can be dissolved, and to institute measures for living apart."

Never, never had she suspected it could come to this. She sat staring at him, her eyes round, her mouth open. Of a verity she did not believe the calm resolute man before her could be the once vacillating, sweet-tempered, yielding Val Elster.

"Have you been taking up with somebody else?"

The earl's brow darkened; he could have ground his teeth with shame, that this woman, debased in mind, vulgar in speech, was his wife's mother.

"Listen, while I speak a word of truth," he said, his eyes bent on her with a strange fire, that if it told of undisguised earnestness, told also of inward fever. "I married your daughter, and I am ready and willing to do my duty by her in all honour, as I have done it since the day of the marriage. Whatever my follies may have been as a young man, I am at least incapable of wronging my wife as a married one. *She* has had no cause to complain of want of affection — ask her whether she has — but —"

"O, what a hypocrite!" interrupted the Dowager, with a shriek. "And all the time you've left her here neglected, while you were taking it out in amusement in London! You've been dinner-giving and Richmond-going, and theatre-frequenting, and card-playing, and race-horsing — and I shouldn't wonder but you've been cock-fighting, and a hundred other things that's

disreputable, and have come down here worn to a skeleton!"

"But if she is discontented, if she does not care for me, as you would seem to intimate," resumed the earl, passing over the attack without notice; "in short, if Maude would be happier without me, I am quite willing, as I have just said, to relieve her of her distasteful husband."

"Of all the wicked plotters, you must be the worst! My darling, unoffending Maude! A divorce for her!"

"We are neither of us eligible for a divorce," he coolly rejoined. "A separation alone is open to us, and that an amicable one. Should it come to it, every possible provision can be made for your daughter's comfort; she shall retain this home; she shall have, if she wishes, a town-house; I will deny her nothing."

Lady Kirton rolled her handkerchief into a ball and rubbed her face gingerly. Not until this moment had she believed him to be in earnest, and the conviction frightened her.

"Why do you wish to separate from her?" she asked, in a subdued tone.

"I do not wish it. I said I was willing to do so if she wished it. You have been taking pains to convince me that Maude's love was not mine, that she was only forced into the marriage with me. Should this have been the case, I must be distasteful to her still; an encumbrance she may wish to get rid of."

The Countess Dowager had overshot her mark, and saw it.

"Understand me," said the earl. "The chief object

I have in life is Maude's comfort. To insure her happiness, I do not care what I sacrifice."

"O! Would you like to separate from her, pray?"

A slight flush rose to his cheek. "My opinion is, that Maude will be happier with me than apart. Should she think otherwise, I will not bring my own feelings in question at all, but act irrespective of them."

"Did she meet you yesterday with unkindness — with dislike?"

"Quite the contrary."

"Of course. Perhaps I was mistaken about the past," said the Dowager, staring at him very hard, and in a sort of defiance. "Maude was always very close. If you said any thing about separation now, I daresay you'd kill her. My belief is, that she does care for you, and a great deal more than you deserve."

"It may be better to ascertain the truth from Maude —"

"You'll not say a syllable to her!" cried the Countess Dowager, starting up in terror. "She'd never forgive me; she'd turn me out of the house. Hartledon, *promise* you'll not tell her."

He stood back against the window, never speaking.

"She does love you; I'll swear it — there! I thought I'd frighten you, for you had no right to send Maude home alone; and it made me very cross, because I saw how she felt it. Separation, indeed! and Maude beginning to make little frocks and caps! What can you be thinking of, Hart?"

He was thinking of a great deal, no doubt; and his thoughts were as bitter as they could well be. He did not wish to separate; he felt, come what come would,

his place should be by his wife's side, as long as circumstances permitted it.

"Will you hear a word of warning, Lady Kirton? I and my wife will be happy enough together, I believe, if we are allowed to be; but the style of conversation you have just adopted to me will not conduce to it; it might retaliate on Maude, you see. Do not again attempt it."

"How you have changed!" was her involuntary remark.

"Yes; I am not the foolish, yielding boy I was. And now I wish to speak of your son. He seems very ill."

"A poking, intruding fellow, why can't he keep his ailments in his own barracks?" was the rejoinder, more wrathful than affectionate. "I told Maude I'd not have him here, and what does she do but go and write off by the same post and tell him to come! I don't like sick folks about me, and never did. — What do *you* want?"

The last question was addressed to Hedges, who had come in uncalled for. It was only to bring a letter to his master. Lord Hartledon seized on it as a welcome interruption, and he carried it outside the glass doors, and sat down on a garden-seat at a distance.

How he hated the style of attack just made on him; the style of the Dowager altogether! He asked himself in what manner he could avoid such for the future. It was a debasing, lowering occurrence, and he felt quite sure that it could hardly have taken place in his servants' hall. But he was glad he had said what he did about the separation. It might grieve him to part from his wife, but Mr. Carr had warned him

that he ought to do it. Certainly, if she disliked him so very much — if she forced it upon him — why, then, it would be an easier task; but she did not dislike him, an' he was any judge. If she had done so before marriage, she had learnt to like him now; and he believed that the bare mention of parting would shock her: and so — his duty seemed to lie by her side. What with one thing and another, the Earl of Hartledon by no means saw his way clear.

He held the letter in his hand for some minutes before he tore it open. The hand-writing warned him that it was from Mr. Carr, and he knew that no pleasant news could be in it. In fact, the earl had placed himself in that unsatisfactory position as to render any thing but ill news next door to an impossibility.

It contained but a few lines — a word of caution that Mr. Carr had forgotten to speak when he took leave of Lord Hartledon the previous morning. "Let me advise you not to say any thing to those people — Gum, I think the name is — about G. G. It might not be altogether prudent for you to do it. Should you remain any time at Hartledon, I will come down for a few days and question for myself."

"I've done it already," thought the earl, as he folded the letter and returned it to his pocket. "As to my staying any time at Hartledon — not if I know it."

Looking up at the sound of footsteps, he saw Hedges approaching. Never free from a certain apprehension when any unexpected interruption occurred — an apprehension that turned his heart sick, and set his pulses beating — the earl waited, outwardly very calm.

"Floyd has called, my lord, and is asking to see

you. He seems rather — rather concerned and put out. I think it's something about — about the death last summer."

Hedges hardly knew how to frame his words, and Lord Hartledon stared at him.

"Floyd can come to me here," he said.

The miller soon made his appearance, carrying a sort of portemonnaie in his hand. It was made of Russian leather, its rims being of solid gold. The earl knew it in a moment, in spite of its marks of defacement.

"Do you recognise it, my lord?" asked the miller.

"Yes, I do," replied Lord Hartledon. "It belonged to my brother."

"Well, I thought so," returned the miller. "On the very day before that unfortunate race last year, his lordship was talking to me, and had this in his hand. I felt sure it was the same the moment I saw it."

"He had it with him on the day of the race," observed Lord Hartledon. "Mr. Carteret said he saw it lying in the boat when they started. We always thought it had been lost in the river. Where did you find it?"

"Well, it's very odd, my lord, but I found it buried."

"Buried!"

"Buried in the ground, not far from the river, alongside the path that leads from where his lordship was found, to Hartledon. I was getting up some dandelion roots for my wife this morning early, and I dug up this close to one. There's where the knife touched it. My lord," added the miller, "I beg to say that I have not opened it. I wiped it and put it in paper,

and said nothing to any body, but came here with it as soon as I thought you'd be up. That lad of mine, Ripper, said last night you were at Hartledon."

The miller was an honest and truthful man; and Lord Hartledon knew that when he said he had not opened it, he had not. It contained still some thin memorandums in his brother's writing, but no money; and this was noticeable, since it was quite sure to have had money in it on that day.

"Those that buried it might have taken it out," he observed, following the bent of his thoughts.

"But who did bury it; and where did they find it, to allow of their burying it?" questioned the miller. "How did they come by it? — that's the odd thing. I am certain it was not in the skiff, for I searched that over myself."

Lord Hartledon said little. He could not understand it; and the incident, with the sight of the slips of paper, was bringing his brother all too palpably before him. One of them had concerned himself, though in what manner he would never know now. It ran as follows: "Not to forget Val." Poor fellow! Poor Lord Hartledon!

"Would your lordship like to come and see the spot where I found it?" asked the miller. "I've just covered it up, so that nobody will notice it going by."

Lord Hartledon said he should, and would go in the course of the day; and Mr. Floyd took his departure. Val sat on awhile where he was, and then he went in, locked up the damp portemonnaie with its tarnished rims, and went on to the presence of his wife.

She was dressed now, but had not come out of her bedroom. She evidently meant to be very kind and pleasant with him; different from what she had used to be, for she smiled, and began a little apology for her tardiness, saying she would get up when he did in future.

He motioned her back to her seat on the sofa before the open window, and sat down by her. His face was grave; she thought she had never seen it so much so — grave and firm, and his voice was grave too, but had a kindly tone in it. He took both her hands between his as he spoke; not so much, it seemed, in affection, as to impress solemnity upon her.

“Maude, I am going to ask you a question, and I beg you to answer me as truthfully as you could answer Heaven. Have you any wish that we should live apart from each other?”

“I do not understand you,” she answered after a pause, during which a flush of surprise or emotion spread itself gradually over her face.

“Nay, the question is plain. Have you any wish to separate from me?”

“I never thought of such a thing. Separate from you! What can you mean?”

“Your mother has dropped a hint that you have not been happy with me. I could almost understand her to imply that you have had a positive distaste to me — a dislike. She sought to explain her words away, but she certainly spoke them. Is it so, Maude? I fancied something of the sort myself in the earlier days of our marriage.”

He turned his head sharply at an interrupting

sound, but it was only the French clock on the mantel-piece, striking eleven.

"Because," he resumed, having waited in vain for an answer, "if such should be really your wish, I will accede to it. I desire your comfort, your happiness beyond any earthly thing; and if the living apart from me would promote it, I will sacrifice my own feelings, and you shall not hear a murmur. Maude, I would sacrifice my life for you."

She burst into tears, and laid her face upon his shoulder. "Are you speaking at all for yourself? Do you wish this?"

"No."

"Then how can you be so cruel?"

"Well, I should have thought it unjustifiably cruel, but for the idea that has been given me. Tell me the whole truth, Maude."

She was turning sick with fear lest his proposed intention should be carried out. She had begun to like her husband during the latter part of their sojourn in London. She had missed him terribly during this long period of lonely ennui at Hartledon; and his tender kindness to her for the past few fleeting hours of this their meeting had seemed like heaven as compared to the solitary past. Her whole heart was in her words as she answered:

"When we first married, I did not care for you; I almost think I did not like you. Every thing was new to me, and I felt like one in an unknown sea. But it wore off—it did indeed; and if you only knew how I have thought of you, and wished for you here, you would never have said any thing so cruel. You

are my husband, — you know you are, — and you cannot put me from you. I cried a little after you went down this morning, because I felt so happy. O Percival, promise me that you will never hint at this again!”

He bent his face and kissed her several times. His course lay plain before him; and if an ugly mountain rose up before his mind's eye, shadowing forth not voluntary but forced separation, he would not look at it in that moment.

“What could mamma mean?” she asked, thinking she would have no objection to lie there placidly in her husband's arms for ever. “I shall ask her.”

“No, Maude; oblige me by saying nothing about it. I have already warned Lady Kirton that it must not be repeated; and I am sure it will not be. I wish you would also oblige me in another matter.”

“In any thing,” she eagerly said, raising her tearful eyes to his. “Val, my darling, — and I have never called you so before,” she fondly whispered, — “ask me any thing.”

“I intend to take your brother to the warmest seaside place England can boast of, at once; to-day or to-morrow. The sea-air may do me good also. I want that, or something else,” he added; his tone assuming a sad weariness as he remembered how futile any “sea-air” would be for mental disease such as his. “Won't you go with us, Maude?”

“O yes, and be glad to go! Take me with you always every where.”

He left her to proceed to the room of Captain Kirton, thinking that he and his wife might have been very happy together yet, but for that one awful shadow

of the past, which she did not know any thing of; and he prayed she never might.

After all, though, it would have been but a very moonlight sort of happiness.

CHAPTER VIII.

Never put in the Newspapers!

THE months rolled on, and Lord and Lady Hartledon did not separate. They remained together, and were, so far, happy enough — the moonlight happiness hinted at; and it is, as I believe, the best and calmest sort of happiness for married life. Maude's temper was unequal, and he was subject to prolonged hours of sadness. But the time went lightly enough over their heads, for all the world saw, as it goes over most people's.

And Lord Hartledon was a free man still, and stood well with the public. Whatever the mysterious accusation brought against him might have been, it was productive of no noisy effects as yet; in popular phrase, it had come to nothing. As yet, as yet always. Whether he had shot a man, or robbed a bank, or fired a church, the incipient accusation died away. But the fear, let it be of what nature it would, never died away in the earl's mind; and he lived as a man who has a sword suspended over his head. Moreover, the sword, in his own imagination, was slipping gradually from its fastenings; and his days were restless, his nights sleepless; the inward fever was ever consuming him.

As none knew better than Thomas Carr. There were two witnesses who could bring the facts home to the earl; so far as was known, only two: the stranger,

who had paid him a visit, and been taken for a clergyman; and the man Gordon, or Gorton. The latter was the dangerous one; and they had not yet been able to trace him. Mr. Carr's friend, Green the detective, had furnished that gentleman with a descriptive bill of Gordon of the mutiny: "a young, slight man, with light eyes and very fair hair." This did not answer exactly to the Gorton who had played his part at Calne; but then, in regard to the latter, there remained the suspicion that the red hair was false. Whether it was the same man, or whether it was two men, — if the phrase may be allowed, — neither of them, to use the expressive words of Mr. Green, turned up. And thus the months had passed on, with nothing particular to mark them. Captain Kirton had been conveyed safely abroad for the winter, and they had good news of him; and the Countess Dowager was inflicting a visit upon one of her married daughters in Germany, the baroness with the unpronounceable name.

And the matter had nearly faded out of the mind of Lady Hartledon. It would have faded quite, but for certain interviews with Thomas Carr at his chambers, when the earl's face of care precluded the idea that the visits could be those of mere idleness or pleasure; and for the secret trouble that unmistakably sat on her husband like an incubus. At times he would moan in his sleep as one in pain; but if told of this, he had always some laughing answer ready for her — that he dreamt he was being run at by a bull, or that she was being tossed by one.

This was the pleasantest phase of Lady Hartledon's married life. Her health did not allow of her mixing in gaiety; and she and her husband passed their time

happily together. All her worse qualities seemed to have left her, or to be sleeping; she was yielding, mild, gentle; her beauty had never been so great as now that it was subdued; her languor of spirit was an attraction, her care to please him genuine; and her husband gave her love for love. They were in their town-house now, not having gone back at all to Hartledon. A fine, handsome, commodious house this, a contrast to the hired one they had first occupied.

In January the baby was born; and Maude's eyes glistened with tears of delight because it was a boy: a little heir to the broad lands of Hartledon. She was very well, and seemed that she could never be tired of fondling her baby.

But in the few first days succeeding that of the birth, a strange fancy took possession of her: she observed, or thought she observed, that her husband did not seem to care for the child. He did not caress it; she once heard him sighing over it; and he never put it into the newspapers. Other countesses' infants, the heirs especially, could be made known to the world in announcements as grand as you please; but not so hers. The omission might never have come to her knowledge, since at first she was not allowed to see newspapers or any other reading, but for a letter from the Countess Dowager. That lady wrote in a high state of wrath from Germany; she had looked every day for ten days in the *Times*, and saw no chronicle of the happy event; and she demanded to know the reason. It afforded her a valve for her temper, which had been in an explosive state for some time against Lord Hartledon, that ungracious son-in-law having actually forbidden her his house until Maude's illness should be

over; telling her plainly that he would not have his wife worried. Lady Hartledon said nothing for a day or two; she was watching her husband; watching for the signs or non-signs of the fancy which had taken possession of her.

He was in her room one dark afternoon, standing with his elbow on the mantel-piece while he talked to her; a spacious room of luxury and comfort, that it must have been almost a pleasure to be ill in. Lady Hartledon was up and dressed, and was sitting in the easy-chair: she seemed to be getting strong rapidly; and the red little gentleman in the cradle, sleeping quietly, was fifteen days old.

"About his name, Percival; what is it to be?" she asked. "Your own?"

"No, no, not mine," said the earl quickly; "I never did like mine. Choose some other, Maude."

"What do you wish it to be?"

"Any thing."

The short answer did not please the young mother; neither did the dreamy tone in which it was spoken. "Don't you care what it is?" she asked rather plaintively.

"Not much, for myself. I wish it to be any thing you shall choose."

"I thought perhaps you would have liked it named after your brother," she said, very much offended on the baby's account.

"George?"

"George, no. I never knew George; I should not be likely to think of him. Edward."

Lord Hartledon looked at the fire, pushing back his luxuriant hair in an absent fashion. "Yes, Maude,

let it be Edward. It will do as well as any thing else."

"Good gracious, Percival, one would think you had been having babies all your life!" she exclaimed resentfully. "'Do as well as any thing else!' If he were our tenth son, instead of our first, you could not treat it with more indifference. I have done nothing but deliberate on the name since he was born; and I don't believe you have once given it a thought."

Lord Hartledon turned his bright face upon her; and when illumined with a smile, as now, it could be as bright as it was before the care came upon it. "I don't think we men attach the importance to names in a general way that you do, Maude. I shall like to have it Edward."

"Edward William Algernon —"

"No, no, no," broke in the earl, as if the number alarmed him. "Pray don't have a string of names: one's quite enough."

"O, very well," she returned, biting her lips. "William was your father's name, and Algernon is my eldest brother's: I supposed you might like them. I thought," she added, after a pause, "we might ask Lord Kirton to be godfather."

"I have fixed on the godfathers already," said the earl. "Thomas Carr will be the one, and I intend to be the other."

"Thomas Carr! A poor hard-working barrister, that not a soul knows, and of no family or influence whatever, godfather to the future earl of Hartledon!" uttered the offended countess.

"I wish it, Maude," said the earl quietly; "Carr is

the most valued friend I have in the world, or ever can have. Oblige me in this."

"Then my brother can be the other."

"No; I shall stand to the child myself; and I wish you would be the godmother."

"Well, I'm sure it's quite reversing the order of things!" she said, tacitly conceding the point. "He'll never get any presents."

"He'll be as well without them."

There ensued a silence. The firelight played on the pink-silk and lace curtains of the baby's bed, as it did on Lady Hartledon's face; a thoughtful face just now. Twilight was drawing on, and the fire lighted the room.

"Percival, do you care for the child?"

The tone had a sound of passion in it, breaking upon the continued silence. Lord Hartledon lifted his bent face and glanced at his wife.

"Do I care for the child, Maude? What a question! I *do* care for him: more than I let appear."

And if her voice had passion in it, his had pain. He crossed the room, and stood looking down on the sleeping baby, touching at length its cheeks with his finger. He could have knelt down, there and then, and wept over the child, and prayed, O how earnestly, that God would take it to Himself, not suffer it to live. Many and many a prayer had ascended from his heart in their earlier married days, that his wife might not bear him children; for he could but entail upon them an inheritance of shame.

"I don't think you have once taken him in your arms, Percival; you never kiss and fondle him. It's quite unnatural."

"I give my kisses in the dark," said the earl with a laugh, as he came back to where she was sitting. And this was in a sense true; for once when he happened to be alone for an instant with the baby, he had clasped it and kissed it in a sort of almost delirious agony.

"You never put it in the *Times*, you know!"

"Never what?"

"Never put its birth in the *Times*. Did you forget it?"

"It must have been very stupid of me," remarked the earl. "Never mind, Maude; he won't grow the less for the omission. When are you coming down stairs?"

"Mamma is in a rage over it; she says such neglect ought to be punished with imprisonment; and she knows you have done it on purpose."

"She is always in a rage with me, no matter what I do," returned Val good-humouredly. "She thought to be here at this time, and sway us all, — you and me and baby; and I stopped it. Ho, ho! young sir!"

The baby had burst out with a cry, and a watchful attendant came gliding in at the sound. Lord Hartledon quitted the room and went straight down to the Temple to Mr. Carr's chambers. He found him in all the bustle of departure from town. A cab stood at the foot of the stairs, and Mr. Carr's laundress, a queer old body with an inverted black bonnet, was handing the cabman a parcel of books.

"A minute more and you'd have been too late," observed Mr. Carr, as Lord Hartledon met him on the stairs, a coat on his arm.

"I thought you did not start till to-morrow."

"But I found I must go to-day. I can give you three minutes, Hartledon. Is it any thing particular?"

The earl drew him into his room. "I have come to crave a favour, Carr. It has been on my lips to ask you before, but they would not frame the words. This child of mine: will you stand to it with myself?"

One moment's hesitation, quite perceptible to the sensitive mind of Lord Hartledon, and then Mr. Carr spoke out bravely and cheerily.

"Of course I will."

"I see you hesitate: but I do not like to ask any one else."

"If I hesitated, it was at thought of the grave responsibility attaching to the office. I believe I look upon it in a more serious light than most people do, and I have never stood to a child yet. I will stand to this one with all my heart."

Lord Hartledon clasped his hand in reply, and they began to descend the stairs. "Poor Maude is dreaming of making a grand thing of the christening," he said; "she wanted to ask Lord Kirton to come to it. It will take place in about a fortnight."

"Very well; I must run up for it, unless you let me stand by proxy. I wish — I wish, Hartledon, you would hear me on another point," added the barrister, halting on a landing-place of the stairs, and dropping his voice to the faintest whisper.

"Well?"

"If you are to go away at all, now's the time. Can't you be taken with an exploring fit, and sail to Africa, or some other place, where your travels would occupy years?"

The earl shook his head. "How can I leave Maude

to do battle alone with the exposure, should it come?"

"It is a great deal less likely to come if you are a few thousand miles away."

"I question it. Should Gordon turn up, he is just the one to frighten a defenceless woman, and purchase his own silence. No; my place is by Maude."

"As you please. I have spoken for the last time. But in remaining with her you run the risk of bringing on further trouble. And to me that would be the worst trouble of all. By the way, any letters bearing a certain postmark, that come addressed to me during my absence, Taylor has orders to send to you. Fare you well, Hartledon; I wish I could help you to peace."

The earl watched the cab rattle away, and then turned to his home. Peace! There was none of that for him.

Lady Hartledon was not to be thwarted on all points, and she insisted on a grand christening. The Countess Dowager would come over for it, and did; the earl could not be discourteous enough to deny this; Lord and Lady Kirton came from Ireland, others came; and for the first time since their marriage they found themselves entertaining guests. Lord Hartledon had made a faint opposition to it, but Maude took her own way. The Countess Dowager was furiously indignant when she heard of the fixed-on sponsors to the child — its father and mother, and that cynical wretch of a Thomas Carr! She danced her most warlike dance, and set no bounds to her tongue. Lord Hartledon played the host in hospitable kindness; but there was a shadow on his face that his wife did not fail to see.

It was the evening before the christening, and a

very snowy evening too. The earl was dressing for dinner; and Maude, herself ready, sat by him, her baby on her knee. The child had that day quitted its long-sleeved gowns; it was attired in a splendidly-worked robe with looped-up sleeves; and she had brought it in to challenge admiration for its pretty arms, with all the pardonable pride of a young mother.

"Won't you kiss it for once, Val?"

He took the child in his arms; it had the fine dark eyes of its mother, and looked straight up from them into his. Lord Hartledon suddenly bent his own face down upon that little one with what seemed like a gesture of agony; and when he raised it, both were wet with tears. Maude felt startled with a sort of terror: love was love; but she did not understand love so painful in its excess as this.

She sat down with the baby on her knee, saying nothing; he did not intend her to see the signs of his emotion. And this brings us to where we were. Lord Hartledon went on with his toilette, and presently somebody knocked at the door.

Two letters for him: they had come by the afternoon general post, very much delayed on account of the snow. He came back to the gas-light, opening one. A full letter, written closely; but he had barely glanced at it when he hastily folded it again, and crammed it into his pocket. If ever a movement expressed something to be concealed, that did. And Lady Hartledon was gazing at him with her questioning eyes.

"Wasn't that letter from Thomas Carr?"

"Yes."

"Is he coming up? Or is Kirton to be proxy?"

"He is — coming, I think," said the earl, evidently knowing nothing one way or the other. "He'll be here, I daresay, to-morrow morning."

Opening the other letter as he spoke — a foreign-looking letter this one — he put it up in the same hasty manner, with barely a glance; and then went on slowly with his dressing.

"Why don't you read your letters, Percival?"

"I've no time. Dinner will be waiting."

She knew that he had plenty of time, and that dinner would not be waiting; she knew quite certainly that there was something in both the letters she must not see. Rising from her seat in silence, she went out of the room with her baby; resentment and an unhealthy curiosity doing battle in her heart together.

And Lord Hartledon slipped the bolt of the door and read the letters at once; the foreign one first, over which he seemed to take an instant's counsel with himself. Before going down, he locked them up in a small ebony cabinet which stood against the wall. The room was his own exclusively; his wife had nothing to do with it.

Had they been alone, he might have observed her coolness to him; but, with many guests to entertain, he neither saw it nor suspected it. She sat opposite to him at dinner in her rich dress, her jewels and her smiles alike gleaming: but the smiles were not turned on him.

"Is that chosen sponsor of yours coming up for the christening; that lawyer-fellow, Carr?" acrimoniously inquired the Countess Dowager from her seat at

table, bringing her face and her turban, all of a scarlet hue together, to bear on the earl.

"He comes up by this evening's train; he will be in London late to-night, if the snow allows him, and will stay with us until Sunday night," replied Val.

"O! *That's* no doubt the reason why you fixed the christening for a Saturday: that your friend might benefit by Sunday?"

"Just so, madam."

And Lady Hartledon knew, by this, that her husband must have read the letters. "I wonder what he has done with them?" came the mental thought, shadowing forth a dim wish that she could read them too.

In the drawing-room, after dinner, some one proposed a carpet-quadrille, but Lord Hartledon seemed averse to it. In his wife's present mood, his opposition was, of course, the signal for her approval, and she began pushing the chairs aside with her own hands. He approached her quietly.

"Maude, do not let them dance to-night."

"Why not?"

"Well, I have a reason. My dear, won't you oblige me in this?"

"Tell me the reason, and perhaps I will; not else."

"I will tell it you another time. Trust me I have a very good one. — What is it, Hedges?"

The butler had come up to his master in the unobtrusive manner of a well-trained servant, and was waiting an opportunity to speak. He said a word in the earl's ear, and Lady Hartledon saw a shiver of surprise run through her husband. He looked here,

he looked there, as one does when perplexed with fear, and went finally out of the room with a smooth face, but one that was turning livid. You may command the muscles of your face, but you cannot control that thrill of blood to the heart which changes its colour.

Lady Hartledon followed in an impulse of curiosity. She looked after him over the balustrades, and saw him turn into the library below. Hedges was standing near the drawing-room door.

"Does any one want Lord Hartledon?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Who is it?"

"I don't know, my lady. Some gentleman."

She ran lightly down the stairs, pausing at the foot, as if ashamed of her persistent curiosity. The well-lighted hall was before her; its large dining-room on one side, its library and a small room communicating on the other. Throwing back her head, as if in defiance, she boldly crossed the hall and opened the door of the library.

Now what had really been the thought of Lady Hartledon, was that the visitor was Mr. Carr; that her husband was going to steal a quiet half-hour with him; and that Hedges was in the plot. She had not lived with the earl the best part of a year not to have learned that Hedges was devoted heart and soul to his master.

She opened the library-door. Her husband's back was towards her; and facing him, his arms raised as if in anger or remonstrance, was the same stranger who had caused some commotion in the other house. She knew him in a moment: there he was, with his staid face, his black clothes, and his white neckcloth,

looking so like a clergyman. Lord Hartledon turned his head.

"I am engaged, Maude; you can't come in," he peremptorily said; and shut the door upon her.

She went slowly up the stairs again, not choosing to meet the butler's eyes, past the drawing-rooms, and up to her own. The sight of the stranger, coupled with her husband's signs of emotion, had renewed all her old suspicions, she knew not, she never had known, of what. Jumping to the conclusion that those letters must be in some way connected with the mystery, perhaps an advent of the visit, it set her thinking, and a very dissatisfied, rebellious feeling arose in her heart.

"I wonder if he put them in the ebony cabinet?" she exclaimed. "I have a key that will fit that."

Yes, she had a key to fit it. Accidentally, as may be said. A few weeks previously, Lord Hartledon mislaid his keys; he wanted something out of this cabinet, in which he did not, as a rule, keep any thing of consequence, and tried hers. One was found to unlock it, and he jokingly told her she had a key to his treasures. But he was one of those who, strictly honourable in themselves, cannot suspect dishonour in another; and Lord Hartledon supposed it simply impossible that she should attempt to open it of her own accord.

They were of different natures; and they had been reared in different schools. Poor Maude Kirton had learnt to be any thing but scrupulous, and really thought it a very slight matter that she was about to do, almost justifiable under the circumstances. Almost;

if not quite. Nevertheless she would not have liked to be caught at it.

She got her bunch of keys and went into her husband's dressing-room, which opened from their bedroom: but she went on tip-toe, as one who knows she is doing wrong. It took some little time to try the keys, for there were several on the ring, and she did not know the right one: but the lid flew open at last, and disclosed the two letters lying there.

She snatched at one, either that came first, and opened it. It happened to be the one from Mr. Carr, and she set herself to read it, her heart beating.

"DEAR HARTLEDON, — I think I have at last found some trace of Gorton. There's a man of that name in the criminal calendar here, down for trial to-morrow; I shall see then whether it is the same, but the description tallies. Should it be our Gorton, I think the better plan will be to leave him entirely alone: a man undergoing a criminal sentence — and this man is sure of a long period of it — has neither the means nor the motive to be dangerous. He cannot molest you while he is working at Portland Island; and, so far, you may live a little eased from fear. I wish —"

Mrs. Carr's was a close handwriting, and this concluded the first page. She was turning it over, when Lord Hartledon's voice on the stairs caught her ear. He seemed to be coming up.

Ay, and he would have caught her at her work but for the accidental circumstance of the old Countess Dowager's happening to look out of the drawing-room when he passed it, and detaining him with some ques-

tions, as he was hastening onwards up the stairs. She did her daughter good service that moment, if she had never done it before. Maude had time to fold the letter, put it back, lock the cabinet, and escape. Had she been a nervous woman, given to be flurried and to lose her presence of mind, she might not have succeeded; but she was cool and quick in the emergency, her brain and her fingers alike steady.

Nevertheless her heart beat a little as she stood within the other room, the door not latched behind her. She did not stir, lest he should hear her; and she hoped to remain unseen until he went down again. A ready excuse was on her lips, did he happen to look in, which was not probable: that she fancied she heard baby cry, and was listening.

Lord Hartledon was walking about his dressing-room, pacing it restlessly, and she very distinctly heard suppressed groans of mortal anguish breaking from his lips. How he had got rid of his visitor, and what the visitor came for, she knew not. He seemed to halt before the washhand-stand, pour out a lot of water, and dash his face into it.

"God help me! God help Maude!" he ejaculated, as he went down again to the drawing-room.

And Lady Hartledon went down also, for the interruption had frightened her, and she did not attempt to open the cabinet again. She never knew more of the contents of Mr. Carr's letter; and only the substance of the other, as communicated to her by her husband.

CHAPTER IX.

Cross-questioning Mr. Carr.

Not until the Sunday morning did Lady Hartledon speak to her husband of the stranger's visit. There seemed to have been no previous opportunity. Mr. Carr had arrived late on the Friday night; indeed it was Saturday morning, for the trains were all detained; and he and the earl sat up together to an unconscionable hour. For this short visit he was the earl's guest. Saturday seemed to have been given to bustle, to preparation, to gaiety, and to nothing else. Perhaps also Lady Hartledon did not wish to mar that day by an unpleasant word. The little child was christened; the names given him being Edward Kirton: the Countess Dowager, who was in a chronic state of dissatisfaction with every thing and every body, cried out at the last moment with a snort, that she thought at least her family name might have been given to the child; and the earl interposed, and said, give it. Lord and Lady Hartledon, and Mr. Carr, were the sponsors: which would afford food for weeks of grumbling to the Countess Dowager. Hilarity reigned, and toasts were given to the new heir of Hartledon: and the only one who seemed not to enter into the spirit of the thing, but on the contrary to be subdued, absent, nervous, was the heir's father.

And so it went on to the Sunday morning. A cold, bleak, bitter morning, the wind howling, and the snow flying in drifts. Mr. Carr went to church, and he was

the only one of the party in the house who did go. The Countess Dowager the previous night had proclaimed the fact that *she* meant to go — as a sort of ante-reproach to any who did not; however, when the church-bells began, she was turning round in her warm bed for another nap.

Maude did not go down early; she had not yet taken to do so. She breakfasted in her room, and stayed there toying with her baby for some time, and then she went into her own sitting-room; a small cosy apartment on the drawing-room floor, into which visitors did not intrude. It looked out on Hyde Park, and a very white and dreary park it was on that particular day.

Drawing a chair to the window, she sat looking out. That is, her eyes were cast on the outer world, but she was so deep in thought as to see nothing. For two nights and a day, burning with curiosity, she had been putting that and that together in her own mind, and drawing conclusions according to her own light. First, there was the advent of the visitor; secondly, there was the letter she had dipped into. She connected the two with each other, and wondered WHAT the secret care could be that had such telling effect upon her husband.

Gorton. The name had struck upon her memory, even while she read it, as one associated with that terrible time — the late earl's death. Gradually the flood-gates of recollection opened, and she knew him for the witness at the inquest about whom some speculation had arisen as to who he was, and what his business at Calne might have been with the Earl of Hartledon and his brother, Val Elster.

Why should her husband be afraid of this man? — as it seemed he *was*, by Mr. Carr's letter. What power had he of injuring the earl? — what secret did he possess of his, that might be used against him? Turning it about in her mind, and turning it again, searching in every probable and improbable corner of the imagination for a solution, Lady Hartledon at length arrived at one, in default of others. She thought that this man must know some untoward fact by which the present earl's succession was imperilled. Possibly the late earl had made some covert and degrading marriage; leaving an obscure child who possessed rights, and might yet claim them. A romantic, far-fetched idea, you will say; but she could call up no other in the least feasible. And she remembered some faint idea having arisen in her mind at the time, that the visit of the man Gorton was in some way connected with trouble, though she did not know with which brother.

Lord Hartledon came in and shut the door. He stirred the fire into a blaze, making some remark about the snow, and wondering how Carr would get down to the country again. Maude gave a slight answer, and then there was a silence. Each was considering how best to say something to the other. She was the quickest.

"Lord Hartledon, what did that man want on Friday?"

"What man?" he rejoined, rather wincing — first at the "Lord Hartledon," next at the subject — for he knew well enough to what she alluded.

"The man — gentleman, or what he is — who had you called down to him in the library."

"By the way, Maude — yes — you should not dart in when I am engaged with visitors on business."

"Well, I thought it was Mr. Carr," she replied, glancing at his heightened colour. "What did he want?"

"Only to say a word to me on a matter of business."

"It was the same person who seemed to upset you so when he called last autumn. You have never been the same man since."

"Don't take fancies into your head, Maude."

"Fancies! you know quite well there is no fancy about it. That man holds some unpleasant secret of yours, I am certain."

"Maude!"

"Will you tell it me?"

"I have nothing to tell."

"Ah, well; I expected you'd not speak," she answered, with subdued acrimony; as much as to say, that she made a merit of resigning herself to an injustice she could not help. "You have been keeping things from me a long time."

"I have kept nothing from you that would give you pleasure to know. It is not — Maude, pray hear me — it is not always expedient for a man to make known to his wife the jars and rubs he has himself to encounter. A hundred trifles may arise that are best spared to her. That gentleman's business concerned others as well as myself, and I am not at liberty to speak of it."

"You refuse, then, to admit me to your confidence? — to let me know what you know?"

"In this I do. I am the best judge — and you must allow me to be so, Maude — of what ought, and what ought not, to be spoken of to you. You may

always rely upon my acting for your best happiness, so far as I am able."

He had been pacing the room while he spoke. Lady Hartledon was too resentful to answer. Glancing at her, he stood still by the mantel-piece and leaned his elbow upon it.

"I want to make known to you another matter, Maude. If I have kept it from you —"

"Does it concern this secret business of yours?" she interrupted.

"No."

"Then let us have done with this first, if you please. "Who is Gorton?"

"Who is — Gorton?" he repeated, after a dumb-founded pause. "What Gorton?"

"Well, I don't know; unless it's that man who gave evidence at the inquest on your brother."

The earl stared at her, as well he might; and gulped down his breath, which seemed choking him. "But what about Gorton? Why do you ask me the question?"

"Because I fancy he is connected with this trouble. I — I thought I heard you and Mr. Carr mention the name yesterday when you were whispering together. I'm sure I did — there!"

So far as Lord Hartledon remembered, he and Mr. Carr had not been whispering together yesterday; had not mentioned at all the name of Gorton. They had done with the subject at that late sitting, the night of the barrister's arrival; who had brought news that the Gorton, that morning tried for a great crime, was *not* the Gorton of whom they were in search. Lord Hartledon gazed at his wife with questioning eyes, but she

persisted in her assertion. It was sinfully untrue; but how else could she have accounted for knowing the name?

"Do you suppose I dreamt it, Lord Hartledon?"

"I don't know whether you dreamt it or not, Maude. Mr. Carr has certainly spoken to me since he came of a man of that name; but as certainly not in your hearing. One Gorton was tried for his life on Friday — or almost for his life — and he mentioned to me the circumstances of the case: housebreaking, accompanied by violence, which ended in death. I cannot understand you, Maude, or the fancies you seem to be taking up."

She saw how it was — that he would admit nothing: and she looked straight out across the dreary park, a certain obstinate defiance veiled in her eyes. By the help of heaven or earth, she would find out this secret that he refused to disclose to her.

"Every action of your life, nearly, bespeaks concealment," she resumed. "Look at those letters you received in your dressing-room on Friday night: you just opened them and thrust them unread into your pocket, because I happened to be there. And yet you talk of loving me! I know those letters contained some secret or other that you dare not tell me."

She rose in some temper, and gave the fire a fierce poke. Lord Hartledon kept her by him.

"One of those letters was from Mr. Carr; and I presume you can make no objection to my hearing from him. The other — Maude, I have waited until now to disclose its contents to you; I would not mar your happiness yesterday."

She looked up at him. Something in his voice, a sad pitying tenderness, caused her heart to beat a shade quicker.

"It was a foreign letter, Maude. I think you observed that. It bore the French postmark."

A light broke upon her. "O Percival, it is about Robert! Surely he is not worse!"

The earl drew his wife close to him, as if he would shelter her: not speaking.

"He is not dead!" she said with a gasping sob. "Ah, you need not tell me; I see it. Robert! Robert!"

"It has been a happy death, Maude, and he is better off. He was quite ready to go. I wish we were!"

She was crying soft tears, her face resting on his arm. Lord Hartledon took out the letter and read the chief portion of it to her. One little part he dexterously omitted, which described the cause of death — disease of the heart.

"But I thought he was getting so much better. What has killed him in this sudden manner?"

"Well, there was no great hope from the first. I confess I have entertained none. Mr. Hillary, you know, warned us that it might end either way."

"Was it decline? — the lungs?" she sobbed.

"He has been declining gradually, no doubt."

"O Percival! why did you not tell me at once?" she cried, with a fresh burst of grief. "It seems so cruel for us to have had all that entertainment yesterday! This is why you did not wish us to dance!"

"And if I had told you, Maude, and stopped the entertainment, allowing the poor little fellow to be christened in gloom and sorrow, you'd have been the first to reproach me; you might have said it augured ill-luck for the child."

"Well, perhaps I should: yes, I am sure I should. You have acted right, after all, Val." And it was a

candid admission, considering what she had been previously saying. He bent towards her with a smile, his voice quite trembling with its earnestness.

"You see now with what motive I hid the letter from you. Maude! my wife! cannot this be an earnest that you should trust me for the rest? In all I do, as Heaven is my witness, I have your comfort first and foremost."

"Don't be angry with me," she sobbed, softening at the words.

He laid his hand on his wife's bent head, thinking how far he was from anger. Anger? He would have died for her then, at that moment, if it might have saved her from the sin and shame that she must share with him.

"Have you told mamma, Percival?"

"Not yet. It would not have been kept from you long, had she known it. She is not up yet, I think."

"Who has written?"

"The doctor who was attending him."

"You'll let me read the letter?"

"I have written to desire that the full particulars may be sent to me: you shall read that one."

The tacit refusal of her request did not strike her. She only supposed the future letter would be more explanatory. He was always anxious for her; and he had written off on the Friday night to ask for a letter giving fuller particulars, while avoiding mention of the cause of death.

Thus harmony for the hour was restored between them; and Lord Hartledon stood the Dowager's hot and loud reproaches with equanimity. In possession of the news of that darling angel's death ever since

Friday night, and to have bottled it up within him till Sunday! She wondered what he thought of himself!

After all, Val had not quite "bottled it up." He had made it known to his brother-in-law, Lord Kirton, and also to Mr. Carr. Both had agreed with him that nothing had better be said until the christening-day was over.

But there came a reaction. When Lady Hartledon had sobbed away her first grief, the other annoyance returned to her, and she fell again to brooding over it in a very discomfoting fashion. She merited blame for this in a degree; but not so much as appears on the surface. If that notion, which she was taking up very seriously, were correct — that her husband's succession was imperilled — it would be the greatest misfortune that could happen to her in life. What had she married for but position? — rank, wealth, her peeress's title? any earthly misfortune would be less keen than this. Any earthly misfortune! Poor Maude!

It was a sombre dinner that evening; the disclosed news of Captain Kirton's death making it so. Besides relatives, but few guests were staying in the house; and the numerous and magnificent dinner-party of the previous day was reduced to a small one on this. The first to come into the drawing-room afterwards, following pretty close on the ladies, was Mr. Carr. The Dowager, who rarely paid attention to appearances, or to any thing else, save her own comfort, had her feet up on a sofa and was snoring; two ladies were standing in front of the fire, talking in an undertone; Lady Hartledon sat on a sofa a little apart, her baby on her knee; and her sister-in-law, the Countess of Kirton, a fragile and rather cross-looking young woman, who

seemed as if a breath would blow her away, was standing over her, studying the infant's face. The latter lady moved away and joined the group at the fire, as Mr. Carr approached Lady Hartledon.

"You have your little charge here, I see!"

"Please to excuse it; I meant to have sent him away before any of you came up," she said quite pleadingly. "Sarah took upon herself to proclaim aloud that his eyes had a squint in them, and I could not help having him brought down to refute her words. A squint, indeed! She's only envious of him."

Sarah was the Countess of Kirton. Mr. Carr smiled.

"She has no children herself; she has fits instead. My pretty baby! I think you might be proud of your godson, Mr. Carr. But he ought not to have been here to receive you, for all that."

"I have come up soon to say good-bye to you, Lady Hartledon. In ten minutes I must be gone."

"In all this snow! What a night to travel in!"

"Necessity bows to no law. — So, sir, you'd imprison my finger, would you!"

He had touched the child's hand, and in a moment it was clasped round his finger. Lady Hartledon laughed.

"Lady Kirton — she's the most superstitious woman in the world — would say that was an omen: that you are destined to be his friend through life."

"As I will be," said the barrister, his tone one of greater earnestness than the occasion seemed to call for.

Lady Hartledon, with a graciousness she was little in the habit of showing to Mr. Carr, made room for him beside her, and he sat down. The baby lay on his back, his wide-open eyes looking upwards, good as gold.

"How quiet he is! How he stares!" reiterated the barrister, who did not understand much about babies, except for a shadowy idea that they lived in a state of crying for the first six months.

"He is the best child in the world; every body says so," she returned. "He is not the least — Hey-day! what do you mean by contradicting mamma like that? Behave yourself, Lord Elster."

For the infant lord, as if in refutation of his goodness, set up a sudden cry. Mr. Carr laughed. He put down in his finger again, and the little fingers clasped round it, and the cry ceased.

"He does not like to lose his friend, you see, Lady Hartledon."

"I wish you would be my friend as well as his," she rejoined; and the low meaning tone struck on Mr. Carr's ear.

"I trust I am your friend," he answered.

She was still for a few moments; her pale beautiful face inclining towards the child's; her large dark eyes bent upon him. She turned them on Mr. Carr.

"This has been a miserable day."

"Yes, for you. It is very grievous to lose a brother."

"And to lose him hundreds of miles away; without the opportunity of a last look, a last farewell. Robert was my best and favourite brother. But the day has been one marked out as miserable for other causes than that."

Was it an uncomfortable prevision of what was coming that caused Mr. Carr not to answer her? He talked to the unconscious baby, and played with its cheeks.

"What secret is this that you and my husband have between you, Mr. Carr?" she asked abruptly.

He finished his laughing with the baby, said something about its soft face, was altogether easy and careless in his manner, and then answered in a half-jesting tone.

"Which one, Lady Hartledon?"

"Which one! Have you more than one?" she continued, taking the words literally.

"We might count half a dozen, I daresay. I cannot tell you how many things I have not confided to him. We are quite —"

"I mean the secret that affects *him*," she interrupted in an aggrieved tone, feeling that Mr. Carr was playing with her. "There is some dread of ill upon him that's wearing him to a shadow, that is poisoning his happiness, that's making his days and nights one long restlessness. Do you think it right to keep it from me, Mr. Carr? It is what you and he are both doing — and in league with each other to do."

"I am not keeping any secret from you, Lady Hartledon."

"You know you are. Nonsense! Do you think I have forgotten that evening that was the beginning of it, when a tall strange man, dressed like a clergyman, came here, and you both were shut up with him for I can't tell how long an interview, and Lord Hartledon came out from it looking like a ghost? You and he both misled me, causing me to believe that the Ashtons were entering an action against him for Breach of Promise; you said the damages were laid at ten thousand pounds. I mean *that* secret, Mr. Carr," she added

with emphasis. "The same man was here on Friday night again; and when you got to the house afterwards, you and Lord Hartledon sat up until nearly daylight."

Mr. Carr, who had his eyes on the exacting baby, shook his head, and intimated that he was really unable to understand her ladyship.

"When you are in town, he is always with you at your chambers; when you are away, he gets long letters from you that I may not see."

"Yes, we have been on terms of close friendship for years. And Lord Hartledon is an idle man, you know, and looks me up."

"He said you were arranging some business for him last autumn."

"Last autumn? Let me see. Yes, I think I was."

"Mr. Carr, is it of any use your playing with me? Do you think it right or kind to do so?"

His manner changed at once; he turned to her with eyes as earnest as her own. —

"Dear Lady Hartledon, I would tell you any thing that I could and ought to tell you. That your husband has been engaged in some complicated business, which I have been — which I have taken upon myself to arrange for him, is very true. I know that he does not wish it mentioned, and therefore my tongue is tied: but it is as well you did not know it, for it would give you no satisfaction."

"Does it involve any thing very frightful?"

"It might involve the — the loss of a large sum of money," he answered, making the best answer he could.

Lady Hartledon sunk her voice to a whisper.

"Does it involve the possible loss of his title? — of Hartledon?"

"No," said Mr. Carr, looking at her with surprise.

"You are sure?"

"Certain. I give you my word. What can you have got in your head, Lady Hartledon?"

She heaved a sigh of relief. "I thought it just possible — but I will not tell you why I thought it — that some claimant might be springing up to the title and property."

Mr. Carr laughed. "That would be a calamity. Hartledon is as surely your husband's as this watch" — taking it out to look at the time — "is mine. When his brother died, he succeeded of right. And now I must go, for my hour is up; and the next time I see you, little gentleman, I shall expect a good account of your behaviour. Why, sir, the finger's mine, not yours. Good-bye, Lady Hartledon."

She gave him her hand coolly, for she was not pleased. The baby began to cry, and was sent away with his nurse.

And then Lady Hartledon sat on alone, feeling that if she ever was to arrive at the solution of the mystery, it would not be by the help of Mr. Carr. Other questions had been upon her lips — who the stranger was? what he wanted? — five hundred of them: but she saw that she might as well have put them to the moon.

And Lord Hartledon went out with Mr. Carr in the inclement night, and saw him off by the Great-Western train.

CHAPTER X.

Maude's Disobedience.

AGAIN the months went on, almost it may be said the years, and little took place worthy of record. Time is an obliterator as well as a soother; and Lady Hartledon had almost forgotten the circumstances which had perplexed and troubled her, for nothing more had come of them.

And the earl? But for a certain restlessness, a hectic face and a worn frame, betraying that the inward fever was not quenched, a startled movement if approached or spoken to unexpectedly, it might be thought that he also was at rest. There were no more anxious visits to Thomas Carr's chambers; he went about his ordinary duties, joined in society, though scantily, sat out his hours in the House of Lords, and did as other men. There was nothing very obvious to tell of inward apprehension; and Maude had certainly dismissed the past, so far, from her mind.

Not since had the earl gone down to Hartledon. With the exception of that short visit of a day or two, already recorded, he had not been to it since his marriage. He would not go: his wife, though she had her way in most things, could not induce him to go. She went once or twice, in a spirit of defiance, it may be said, and meanwhile he stayed in London, or took a short trip to the Continent, as the whim prompted him. Once they had gone abroad together, and remained for

some months; taking servants and the children, for there were two children now; and the little fellow who had clasped the finger of Mr. Carr was a sturdy boy of three years old.

Lady Hartledon's health was beginning to fail. The doctors told her she must be more quiet; she went out a great deal, and seemed to live but in the world. Her husband remonstrated with her on the score of her health alone; but she laughed at him, and said she was not going to give up pleasure yet. Of course you know that these gay habits are a great deal easier got into than relinquished: once fairly embarked on the round of dissipation, we fancy we cannot exist without it. Lady Hartledon had fainting-fits; she felt pain and palpitation sometimes in the region of the heart; and she grew very thin without apparent cause. She said nothing about it, lest it should be made a plea for her living quieter: she did not dream of danger. Had she known what killed her brother Robert, her fears might possibly have been awakened. Lord Hartledon did not forget; he suspected mischief might be arising, and cautiously questioned her; she denied that any thing was the matter, and he felt re-assured. His chief care was to keep her free from excitement; and in this hope he gave way to her more than he would otherwise have done. But, alas! the moment was approaching when all his care would be in vain; when the built-up security of years was blown over by a single act of wilful disobedience to him: the sword, so long tottering over his head, was to fall on hers at last.

One spring afternoon, in London, he was in his wife's sitting-room; the little room where you have seen her before, looking on to the Park. The children were

playing on the carpet — two pretty little things; the girl eighteen months old.

"Take care!" suddenly called out Lady Hartledon.

Some one was opening the door, and the little Maude was too near to it. She ran and picked up the child, and Hedges came in with a card for his master, saying at the same time that the gentleman was waiting. The earl held it towards the blaze of the fire to discern the name.

"Who is it?" asked Lady Hartledon, putting the little girl down by the window, and approaching her husband. But there came no answer.

Whether the silence aroused her suspicions — whether any look in her husband's face recalled that evening of terror long ago — or whether some subtly malicious instinct whispered to her of the truth, can never be known. Certain it was that the past rose up as in a mirror before Lady Hartledon's imagination, and she connected this visitor with that. She bent over his shoulder to peep at the card; and the earl, scared out of his presence of mind, tore it in two and threw the pieces in the fire.

"O, very well, Lord Hartledon!" she exclaimed, taking mortal offence. "But you cannot blind me: it is your mysterious visitor again."

"I don't know what you mean, Maude. It is only some one on business."

"Then I will go and ask him his business," she said, moving to the door with angry resolve.

The earl was too quick for her. He placed his back against the door, and lifted his hands in a sort of scared commotion. It was a great fault of his, or per-

haps a misfortune — for he could not help it — this want of self-control in manner on an emergency.

“Maude, I forbid you to interfere in this: you must not. Maude, for heaven’s sake, sit down and remain in peace.”

“I’ll see your visitor, and know, at last, what this strange trouble is. I will, Lord Hartledon.”

“You must not: do you hear me?” he reiterated with deep agitation, for she was trying to force her way out of the room. “Believe me, Maude — listen, Maude — I do not mean to be harsh, but, for your own good, I conjure you to be still. I forbid you, by the obedience you promised me before God, to inquire into or to stir in this. It is a private affair of my own, and not yours. Stay here until I return.”

Maude drew back, as if in obedience, shrugging her shoulders; and the earl, supposing he and reason had prevailed, quitted the room and closed the door. He was quite mistaken. Never had her solemn vows of obedience been so utterly despised; never had the temptation to evil been so ripe in her heart.

She unlatched the door and listened. The earl went downstairs and into the library, just as he had done the evening before the christening. And Lady Hartledon was as certain that the same man was awaiting him there as that she herself lived to remember it. Ringing the nursery-bell, she took off her black kid slippers, unseen, and hid them under a chair.

“Remain here with the children,” was her order to the nurse who appeared, as she shut the woman in the room.

Creeping down softly on the stair-carpeting, she opened the door of the room behind the library, and

glided in. It was a small room, used exclusively by Lord Hartledon, where he kept a heterogeneous mass of things — papers, books, cigars, pipes, guns, scientific models, any thing, — and which nobody but himself ever thought to enter. The intervening door between that and the library was not latched; and Lady Hartledon, cautiously, in the obscurity of the evening, pushed a further crevice in it, bit by bit, to admit of an eye and an ear. Wilful, unpardonable disobedience! when he had so strongly forbidden her! It was the same tall stranger. He was speaking in a low tone, and the earl leaned against the wall with a blank expression of face.

She saw; and heard. But how she controlled her feelings, to remain and make no sign, she never knew. But that the instinct of self-esteem was one of the strongest passions in Maude Hartledon's heart, the dread of detection in proportion to it, she never had remained. There she was, and she could not get away. The subtle, noiseless dexterity which had served her in coming might desert her in returning. Had their senses been on the alert, they might have heard her poor heart beat.

The interview did not last long — about twenty minutes; and while the earl was attending his visitor to the door, she escaped upstairs again, motioned away the nurse, and resumed her shoes. But what did she look like? Not like Maude, Countess of Hartledon. Her face was as that of one upon whom some awful doom has fallen; her breath was coming in gasps; and she kneeled down on the carpet and clasped her children to her beating heart with an action of wild despair.

"O, my boy! my boy! O, my little Maude!"

Suddenly she heard her husband's step approaching, and she pushed them from her, and rose and stood at the window, apparently looking out on the darkening world.

The earl came in, gaily and cheerily, his manner lighter than it had been for years.

"Well, Maude, I have not been long, you see. Why don't you have lights?"

She did not answer: she only stared straight out. The earl approached her. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing," she answered: "my head aches. I think I shall lie down until dinner-time. Eddy, open the door, and call out Nurse, as loud as you can call."

The little boy obeyed, and the nurse returned, and was ordered to take the children. Lady Hartledon was following them to go to her own room, when she fell into a chair and went off in a dead faint.

"It's that excitement," said the earl. "I do wish Maude would be reasonable!"

The illness, however, appeared to be more serious than a common fainting-fit; and Lord Hartledon, remembering the suspicion of heart-disease, sent for the family doctor, Sir Alexander Pepps, an oracle in the fashionable world.

A different result showed itself — equally, however, caused by excitement — and the Countess Dowager arrived in a day or two in hot haste. Lady Hartledon lay in bed, and did not attempt to get up or to get better. She lay almost as one without life, taking no notice of any body, turning her head from

her husband when he entered, refusing to answer her mother, keeping the children away from the room.

"Why doesn't she get up, Pepps?" demanded the Countess Dowager wrathfully, pouncing upon the physician one day in the hall, when he was leaving the house.

Sir Alexander, who might have been supposed to have received his baronetcy for his skill, but that titles, like kissing, go by favour, stopped short, took off his hat, and presumed that Lady Hartledon felt more comfortable in bed.

"Rubbish to comfort!" said the Dowager. "We might all take to lie in bed, if we studied comfort. Is there any earthly reason why she should stay there, Pepps?"

"Not any, except weakness."

"Except idleness, you mean," was the retort; for the lady was not in a genial mood that day. "Why don't you order her up?"

"I have ordered her, and she does not attend to me," replied Sir Alexander.

"O," said the Dowager. "She was always wilful. What about her heart?"

"Her heart!" echoed Sir Alexander, looking up now as if a little aroused.

"Dear me, yes; her heart; I didn't say her liver. Is it sound, Pepps?"

"It's sound, for any thing I know to the contrary. I never suspected there was any thing the matter with her heart."

"Then you are a fool!" retorted the complimentary Dowager.

Sir Alexander's temperament was one of remark-

able calmness, not to say apathy. Nothing could arouse him out of his tame civility, which had been taken more than once for obsequiousness. The Countess Dowager of Kirton had patronised him in earlier years, when he was not the great man, or had begun to dream of becoming one.

"Don't you recollect I once consulted you on the subject — what's your memory good for? She was a girl then, of fourteen or so; and you were worth fifty of what you are now, in point of discernment."

The oracle carried his thoughts back, and really could not recollect it. "Ahem! yes; and the result was — was —"

"The result was, that you said the heart had nothing the matter with it, and I said it had," broke in the impatient Dowager. "We told her she was being sounded for worms."

"Ah, yes; you did, madam, I remember. Pray, have you cause to suspect any thing wrong now?"

"That's what you ought to have ascertained, Pepps, not me. Now then; what d'you mean by your neglect? What, I ask, does she lie in bed for? If her heart's right, then there's no more the matter with her than there is with you."

"Perhaps your ladyship can get her to exert herself," suggested the bland doctor. "I can't; and I confess I think that she only wants arousing."

With a flourish of his hat and his small gold-headed black cane — an old-fashioned appendage that Sir Alexander always carried, and got laughed at in consequence — the doctor bowed himself out from the formidable Dowager. That lady turned her back upon

him, and betook herself on the spur of the moment to Maude's room, determined to "have it out."

Curious sounds greeted her, as of some one in hysterical pain. On the bed, clasped to his mother in nervous agony, was the wondering child, Lord Elster. Kissing, crying, moaning over him, was she; words of distress, nay, of despair, breaking from her. It seemed, the little boy, who was a rather self-willed and rebellious boy on occasion, had broken from the nursery, and stolen into his mother's room in defiance of orders. The Countess Dowager halted at the door, and looked out from her astonished eyes.

"O Edward, if we were but dead! O, my darling, my boy, my precious one, if it would but please Heaven to take us both! I couldn't send for you, child; I couldn't see you; the sight of you kills me. You don't know; my babies, you don't know!"

"What on earth does all this mean?" interrupted the Dowager, stepping forward. And Lady Hartledon dropped the boy, and fell back on the bed, sobbing and crying.

"What have you done to your mamma, sir?"

The child, conscious that he had not done any thing, but frightened on the whole, repented of his disobedience, and escaped from the chamber quicker than he had entered it. The Countess Dowager hated to be puzzled, and went wrathfully up, and shook her daughter by the arm.

"Perhaps you'll tell me what's the matter, Maude."

Lady Hartledon's sobs subsided, and she grew calm. The Countess Dowager pressed the question.

"There's nothing the matter," came the tardy and rather sullen reply.

"Why do you wish yourself dead, then?"

"Because I do."

"How dare you answer me so!"

"It's the truth. I should be spared suffering."

The Countess Dowager paused. "Spared suffering!" she mentally repeated; and being a woman given to arrive at rapid conclusions without rhyme or reason, she bethought herself that Maude must have become acquainted with the suspicion in regard to her heart, and was fearing it.

"Who told you that?" shrieked the Dowager. "It was that fool Hartledon."

"He has told me nothing," said Maude, in an access of resentment, all too plain. "Told me what?"

"Told you what! why about your heart. That's what I suppose it is."

Maude raised herself upon her elbow, her wan face fixed on her mother's. "Is there any thing the matter with my heart?" she calmly said.

And then the old woman found she had made a grievous mistake, and hastened to repair it.

"I thought there might be, and I asked Pepps. I've just asked him now; and he says there's nothing the matter with it."

"I wish there was!" said Maude, with a convulsive sob.

"You wish there was! That's a pretty wish for a reasonable Christian," cried the tart Dowager. "You want your husband about you; saying such things!"

"I wish he was hanged!" cried Maude, showing her glistening teeth.

"My gracious!" exclaimed the wondering old lady, after a pause. "What has he done?"

"Why did you urge me to marry him? O mother, can't you see that I am dying — that I am dying of horror — and shame — and grief? You had better have buried me instead."

For once in her selfish and vulgar mind the Countess Dowager felt a feeling akin to fear. In her astonishment she thought Maude must be going mad.

"You'd do well to get a bit of sleep, dear," she said in a subdued tone; "and to-morrow you must get up; Pepps says so; he thinks you want rousing."

"I have not slept since; it's not sleep, it's a dead stupor, in which I dream things as horrible as the reality," murmured Maude, with a wailing sob, unconscious perhaps that her words were heard. "I shall never sleep again."

"Not slept since when?"

"I don't know."

"Can't you let a body know what you are drifting at?" cried the puzzled Dowager. "If you've any grievance, say it out; if you've not, don't talk nonsense. Now then."

But Lady Hartledon, even though thus sweetly allured to confession, held her tongue. Her half-scattered senses came back to her, and with them a reticence which she would not break. The Countess Dowager hardly knew whether she deserved pitying or shaking, and went off to the earl in a fit of exasperation, breaking in upon her son-in-law as he was busy looking over some accounts in the library.

"I want to know what it is that's the matter with Maude."

He turned round in his chair, marking the place where he left off in the figures, and saw the Countess Dowager's flaxen wig and inflamed face. The earl did not know what was the matter with his wife any more than the questioner did. He supposed she'd be all right when she got stronger.

"She says it's *you*," said the gentle Dowager, improving upon her information. "She has just been wishing you were hanged."

"Ah, you have been teasing her," returned the earl with composure. "Maude says all sorts of things when she's put out."

"Perhaps she does," was the retort; "but she meant this, for she showed her teeth when she said it. You can't blind me; and I have seen ever since I came here that there was something wrong between you and Maude."

For the matter of that, the earl had seen it too. Since the night of his wife's fainting-fit she had scarcely spoken a willing word to him; had appeared as if she could not tolerate his presence for an instant in her room. Lord Hartledon felt privately persuaded that it arose from resentment at his having refused to allow her to interfere or to see the stranger — refused, it may be said, by force. The earl rose from his seat.

"There's nothing wrong between me and my wife, Lady Kirton. If there were, you must pardon me for saying that I could not suffer interference in it. But there is not."

"Something's wrong somewhere. I found her just now sobbing and groaning and moaning over Elster, wishing they were both dead, and all the rest of it. If

she's going on like this for nothing, she's losing her senses, that's all."

"She'll be all right when she's stronger. Pray don't worry her. She'll be well soon, I daresay. And now I shall be glad if you'll leave me, for I am very busy."

She did not leave him any the quicker for the request. She stayed to worry him, as it was in her nature to worry every body. Getting rid of her at last, he turned the key of the door, and wished her a hundred miles away.

The wish bore fruit. In a few days some news she heard regarding her eldest son — who was a widower now — took the Dowager to Scotland; and Lord Hartledon wished he could as easily turn the key of the house upon her as he had turned that of the room.

CHAPTER XI.

The Sword Slipped.

SUMMER dust was in the London streets, and summer weather in the air, and the carriage of that fashionable medical practitioner, Sir Alexander Pepps, still waited before Lord Hartledon's house. It had waited there more frequently in these later weeks.

The great world — *her* world — wondered what was the matter with her: Sir Alexander wondered also. Perhaps had he been a less courtly man he might have rapped out "obstinacy," if asked upon the point; as it was, he murmured of "weakness." Weak she undoubtedly was; and she seemed not to try in the least to get strong again. She did not go into society now; she dressed as usual, and sat in her drawing-room, and received a visitor or two if the whim took her; but she was mostly denied to all; and said she was not well enough to go out. From her husband she remained bitterly estranged. If he attempted to be friends with her, to ask what it was that was ailing her, she either tartly refused to say, or maintained a persistent silence. Lord Hartledon could not account for her behaviour, and was getting tired of it.

Poor Maude! That some very grievous blow had fallen upon her was all too evident. Resentment, anguish, bitter despair alternated within her breast, and she seemed really not to care whether she lived or died. O, was it for *this* that she had schemed, and so

successfully, to wrest Lord Hartledon from his promised bride, Anne Ashton? She would lie back in her chair and ask it. No labour of hers could by any possibility have brought forth a result by which that young lady could be so well avenged. Heaven is true to itself: and Dr. Ashton had left vengeance with it. Lady Hartledon looked back on her fleeting triumph; a triumph at the time certainly, but a short one. It had not fulfilled its golden promises: that sort of triumph perhaps never does. It had been followed by ennui, repentance, dissatisfaction with her husband, and it had resulted in a very moonlight sort of happiness, which had at length centred only in the children. The children! Maude gave a cry of anguish as she thought of them. No; take it altogether, the play from the first had not been worth the candle. And now? — she threw up her thin hands in a frenzy of impotent rage — with Anne Ashton had lain the real triumph, with herself the sacrifice. Too well Maude understood a remark her husband once made, in answer to a reproach of hers in the first year of their marriage — that he was thankful not to have wedded Anne.

One morning Sir Alexander Pepps, on his road from the drawing-room to his chariot — a very old-fashioned chariot that all the world knew — paused midway in the hall, with his cane to his nose, and condescended to address the man with the powdered wig who was escorting him.

“Is the earl at home?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I wish to see him.”

So the wig changed its course, and Sir Alexander was bowed into the presence. His lordship rose with

what the French would call empressement, to receive the great man.

"Thank you, I have not time to sit," said he, declining the seat offered him, and standing, cane in hand. "I have three consultations to-day, and some urgent cases. I grieve to have a painful duty to fulfil to your lordship; but I must inform you that Lady Hartledon's health gives me uneasiness."

The Earl did not immediately reply; but it was not from want of genuine concern.

"What is it that is really the matter with her?"

"Debility; nothing else," replied Sir Alexander. "But these cases of extreme debility cause us much perplexity. Where there is no particular disease to treat, and the patient does not rally, why —"

He understood the doctor's pause to mean something ominous. "What can be done?" he asked. "I have remarked, with pain, that she does not get strength. Change of air? The seaside? —"

"She says she won't go," interrupted the physician. "In fact, her ladyship objects to every thing I can suggest or propose."

"It's very strange," said the earl.

"At times it has occurred to me that she must have something on her mind," continued Sir Alexander, raising the cold top of his cane to his mouth and lowering it again. "Upon my delicately hinting this opinion to Lady Hartledon, she denied it with an angry vehemence which caused me to suspect I was correct. Does your lordship know of any thing likely to — to torment her?"

"Not of any thing," replied Lord Hartledon con-

fidently. "I think I can assure you that there's nothing of the sort."

And his lordship spoke according to his belief; for he knew of nothing. He would have supposed it just an impossibility that Lady Hartledon had been made privy to the dreadful secret which had weighed on him; and he never gave that a thought.

Sir Alexander nodded, reassured on the point.

"I should wish for a consultation, if your lordship has no objection."

"Then pray call it without delay," said the earl. "Have any thing, do any thing, that may conduce to Lady Hartledon's recovery. You do not suspect heart-disease?"

"The symptoms are not those of any heart-disease known to me. The Countess Dowager of Kirton spoke to me of this; but I see nothing to apprehend at present on that score. If there's any latent affection, it has not yet shown itself. Then we'll arrange the consultation for to-morrow."

Sir Alexander Pepps was bowed out; and the consultation took place; which left the matter just as it was before. The wise doctors thought there was nothing radically wrong; but strongly recommended change of air. Sir Alexander confidentially mentioned Torbay; he had great faith in Torbay; perhaps his lordship could induce Lady Hartledon to try it? She had flatly told the consultation that she'd *not*.

Lady Hartledon was seated in the drawing-room when he went in, willing to do what he could; any urging of his had not gone far with her of late. A white silk shawl covered her dress of green check silk; she wore a shawl constantly now, having a

perpetual tendency to shiver; her handsome features were white and attenuated, but her eyes were brilliant still, and her dark hair was dressed in elaborate braids.

"So you have had the doctors here, Maude," began the earl cheerfully.

She nodded a reply, and began to fiddle with the body of her gown. It seemed that she had to do something or other always to her attire whenever he spoke to her — which took her attention partially away.

"Sir Alexander tells me they have been recommending you Torbay."

"I am not going to Torbay."

"O, yes, you are, Maude," he soothingly said. "It will be a nice change for us all. The children will benefit as much as you, and so shall I."

"I tell you I shall not go to Torbay."

"Would you prefer any other place?"

"I'll not go anywhere; I have told them so."

"Then, Maude, I declare that I'll carry you off by force!" he cried rather sharply. "Why do you vex me? You know you must go."

She made no reply; the unbuttoning and buttoning the waist of her gown occupied her eyes and fingers. He drew a chair close to her and sat down.

"Maude," he said, speaking all the more gently for his recent outbreak, "you must be aware that you do not recover so quickly as we could wish —"

"I do not recover at all," she interrupted. "I don't want to recover."

"My dear, how can you talk so? There is nothing

the matter with you but weakness, and that will soon be overcome if you exert yourself."

"No, it won't. I shall not leave home."

"Somewhere you must go, for the workmen are coming into the house; and for the next two months it will not be habitable."

"Who is bringing them in?" she asked with flashing eyes.

"You know it was decided long ago that the house should be done up this summer. It wants it badly enough. Torbay —"

"I will not go to Torbay, Lord Hartledon. If I am to be turned out of this house, I'll go to the other."

"What other?"

"Hartledon."

"Not to Hartledon," said the earl quickly, for his dislike to the place had grown with time, and the word grated on his ear.

"Then I remain where I am."

"Maude," he resumed in a quiet tone, "I will not urge you to try the sea-air for my sake, because you do what you can to show me I am of very little account to you; but I will say try it for the sake of the children. Surely, they are dear to you!"

A faint, subdued sound of pain broke from her lips, as if she could not bear to hear them named.

"It's of no use prolonging this discussion," she said. "An invalid's fancies may generally be trusted, and mine point to Hartledon — if I am to be disturbed at all. I'd not much mind going there."

A pause ensued, Lord Hartledon had taken her hand, and was mechanically turning round her wedding-

ring, his thoughts far away; it hung sufficiently loose, now, on the wasted finger. She lay back in her chair, looking on with apathy, too indifferent to withdraw her hand.

"Why did you put it on?" she asked abruptly.

"Why indeed?" returned his lordship, deep in his abstraction. "What did you say, Maude?" he added, awaking in a flurry. "Put what on?"

"My wedding-ring."

"My dear! But about Hartledon — if you fancy that, and nowhere else, I suppose we must go."

"You also?"

"Of course."

"Ah! when your wife's chord of life is tightening, what good, model husbands you men become!" she uttered. "You have never gone to Hartledon with me; you have suffered me to be there alone, through a ridiculous reminiscence; but now that you are about to lose me, you will go!"

"Why do you encourage these gloomy thoughts about yourself, Maude?" he asked, passing by the Hartledon question. "One would think you wished to die."

"I do not know," she replied in a tone of deliberation. "Of course no one, at my age, can be tired of the world, and for some things I wish to live; but for others I shall be glad to die."

"Maude! Maude! It is wrong to say this. You are not likely to die."

"I can't tell. All I say is, I shall be glad, for some things, if I do."

"What is all this?" exclaimed the earl, after a bewildered pause. "Is there any thing on your spirits,

Maude? Are you grieving after that little premature infant?"

"No," she answered, "not for him. I grieve for the two who remain."

Lord Hartledon looked at her. A dread, which he strove to throw from him, struggling to his conscience.

"I think you are deceived in my state of health. And if I object to go to the sea-side, it is chiefly because I would not die in a strange place. If I am to die, I should like to die at Hartledon."

His hair seemed to rise up in horror at the words. "Maude! have you any disease that you are concealing?"

"Not any. But the belief has been upon me for some time that I should not get over this. You must have seen how I appear to be sinking."

"And with no disease! I don't understand it!"

"No particular disease of body."

"You are weak, dispirited — I cannot pursue these questions, Maude," he broke off. "Tell me in a word: is there any cause for this?"

"Yes."

The earl gathered up his breath. "What is it?"

"What is it!" repeated Lady Hartledon, her eyes a-blaze with a sudden light. "What is it that has weighed *you* down, not to the grave, for men are strong, but to terror, and shame, and sin? What secret is it, Lord Hartledon?"

His lips were whitening. "But it—even allowing that I have a secret — need not weigh down you."

"Not weigh me down! — to terror, deeper than

yours; to shame, more abject? Suppose I know the secret?"

"You cannot know it," he gasped. "It would have killed you."

"And what *has* it done? Look at me."

"Oh, Maude," he wailed, "what is it that you do, or do not know? How did you learn any thing of it?"

"I learnt it through my own folly. I am sorry for it now. My knowing it can make the fact neither better nor worse; and perhaps I might have been spared the knowledge to the end."

"But what is it that you know?" he asked, rather wishing at the moment he was dead himself.

"*All.*"

"It is impossible."

"It is true."

And he felt that it was true; that here was the solution to the conduct that had puzzled him, puzzled the doctors, puzzled the household and the Countess Dowager.

"And how? — and how?" he gasped.

"When that stranger was here last, I heard what he said to you," she replied, avowing the fact without shame in the moment's terrible anguish. "I made the third at the interview."

He looked at her in utter disbelief.

"You refused to let me go down. I followed you, and stood at the little door of the library. It was open, and I — heard — every word."

The last words were spoken with an hysterical sobbing of the breath. "O Maude!" broke from the lips of Lord Hartledon.

"You'll reproach me for disobedience, of course; for meanness, perhaps; but I *knew* there was some awful secret, and that you did not tell it me. I earned my punishment, if that will be any satisfaction to you; I have never enjoyed an instant's peace since, night or day."

He hid his face on his wife's arm in his pain. This was the moment he had dreaded for years; any thing, so that it might be kept from her! he had prayed in his never-ceasing fear.

"Forgive, forgive me! O Maude, forgive me!"

She did not respond; she did not attempt to soothe him: if ever looks expressed reproach and aversion, hers did then.

"Have compassion upon me, Maude! I was more sinned against than sinning. Compassion! compassion!"

"What compassion had you for me? How dared you marry me? you, tied with crime?"

"The worst is over, Maude; the worst is over."

"It can never be over: you are guilty of wilful sophistry. The crime remains; and — Lord Hartledon — its fruits remain."

He interrupted her excited words by voice and gesture; he took her hands in his. She snatched them from him, and burst into a fit of hysterical sobbing, which ended in a faintness almost like death. He did not dare to call assistance; an unguarded word might have slipped out unawares.

Shut them in; shut them in! they had need to be alone in a scene like that.

Lord and Lady Hartledon went down to Calne, as she wished. But not immediately; some two or three weeks elapsed first, and during that time Mr. Carr was

a good deal with both of them. Their sole friend: the only man that was cognisant of the trouble that they had yet to do fierce battle with; and who alone might whisper a word of something like consolation.

Lady Hartledon seemed to improve. Whether it was the country, or the sort of patched-up peace that reigned between her and her husband, she got stronger and better, and began to go out again and enjoy life as usual. But in saying life, it must not be thought that gaiety is implied; none could shun that as Lady Hartledon seemed to shun it. And the earl, for the first time since his marriage, began to take some interest in his native place, and in his own home. The old feeling of sensitiveness, in regard to the meeting of the Ashtons, lingered on him still; was, in fact, nearly as strong as ever; and he had the good sense to see that this must be overcome, if possible, if he made Hartledon his home for the future, as his wife now talked of doing.

As a preliminary step to it, he appeared at church; one, two, three Sundays. On the second Sunday, his wife went with him. Anne was in her pew, with her younger brother, but not Mrs. Ashton: she, as Lord Hartledon knew by report, was too ill now to go out. Each day Dr. Ashton did the whole duty; his curate, Mr. Graves, was taking a holiday. His lordship heard another report, that the curate had been wanting to press attentions on Miss Ashton; truth was, as none had known better than Val Elster, Mr. Graves had wanted to press them years and years ago. He had at length made her an offer, and she had angrily refused him. A foolish girl! said indignant Mrs. Graves, reproachfully. Her son was a model son, and would make a model husband; and he would be a wealthy

man, as Anne knew, for he must sooner or later come into the entailed property of his uncle. I don't like models, returned Anne. It was not in the least pleasant to Lord Hartledon to stand there in his pew, with recollection upon him, and the gaze of the Ashtons studiously turned from him, and Jabez Gum looking out at him from the tail of his eyes, as he made his sonorous responses. A wish for reconciliation took strong possession of the earl, and he wondered whether he could not bring himself to sue for it. He wanted besides to stay to the after-service, which he had not done since he was a young man — never since his marriage. Maude had stayed occasionally, as was the fashion; but he never. I beg you not to quarrel with me for the word; some of the partakers in that after-service remain from no higher motive. Certainly poor Maude had not.

On the third Sunday, Lord Hartledon went to church in the evening — alone; and when service was over, he waited until the church had emptied itself, and then made his way into the vestry. Jabez was passing out of it, and touched his hair to him, having no hat on, and the rector was coming out behind him. Lord Hartledon stopped the latter, and craved a minute's conversation. Dr. Ashton bowed rather stiffly, put his hat down, and Jabez shut them in.

"Is there any service you require of me?" inquired the rector coldly.

It was the impulsive Val Elster of old days who answered; his hand held out pleadingly, his ingenuous soul shining forth from his blue eyes.

"Yes there is, Dr. Ashton; I have come to pray for it — your forgiveness."

"My Christian forgiveness you have had already," returned the clergyman after a pause.

"But I want something else. I want your pardon as a man; I want you to look at me and speak to me as you used to do. I want to hear you call me 'Val' again; to take my hand in yours, and not coldly; in short, I want you to help me to forgive myself."

In that moment — and Dr. Ashton, minister of the gospel though he was, could not have explained it — all the old love for Val Elster rose bubbling up in his heart. A stubborn heart withal, as all hearts are since Adam sinned; and he did not respond to the offered hand, his features relaxed not in their sternness in spite of the pleading look.

"You must be aware, Lord Hartledon, that your conduct does not merit pardon. As to friendship — which is what you ask for — it would be incompatible with the distance you and I must observe to each other."

"Why need we observe it? if you accord me your true forgiveness?"

The question was one not easy to respond to candidly. The doctor could not say, Your intercourse with us might be dangerous to the peace of one heart yet; and in his inner conviction he believed that it might be. He only looked at Val; at the yearning face, at the tearful eyes; and in that moment it occurred to the doctor that something beside the ordinary wear and tear of life had worn the once smooth face, had brought streaks of silver to the still luxuriant hair.

"Do you know that you nearly killed her?" he asked, his voice softening.

"I have known that it might be so. Had there been *any* atonement in my power to make; any means by which the grief might have been soothed, I would have gone to the ends of the earth to accomplish it. But, of all the world, I alone might attempt nothing. For myself I have spent the years in misery; not on that score," he hastened to add in his truth, and a thought crossed Dr. Ashton that he must allude to unhappiness with his wife — "on another. If it will be any consolation to know it — if you might accept it as even the faintest shadow of atonement — I can truly say that few have gone through the care that I have, and lived. Anne has been amply avenged."

The rector laid his hand on the slender fingers, hot with fever, whiter than they ought to be, betraying the life's inward care. He forgave him from that moment; and forgiveness with Dr. Ashton meant forgiveness.

"You were always your own enemy, Val."

"Ay. Heaven alone knows the extent of my folly; and of my punishment."

From that hour Lord Hartledon and the rectory were not total strangers. He called there once in a way, rarely seeing any one but the doctor; now and then Mrs. Ashton; by chance accident, Anne. Times and again was it on Val's lips to confide to Dr. Ashton the nature of the sin upon his conscience; but his innate sensitiveness, the shame that would reflect upon him, stepped in and sealed the secret. Meanwhile, perhaps he and his wife had never lived on terms of such true cordiality as now. *There were no secrets between them:* and let me tell you that is one of the keys to happiness in married life. Whatever the past had been, Lady Hartledon appeared to condone it; at least she no

longer openly resented it to her husband. It is just possible that a shadow of the future, an unexplained prevision of the severing of the tie, very near now, might have been unconsciously upon her, guiding her spirit to meekness, if not quite yet to peace. Lord Hartledon thought she was growing quite well; and, save that she would rather often go into a passion of hysterical tears as she clasped her children to her, particularly the boy, her days passed calmly enough. She indulged the children beyond all reason, and it was of no use for their father to interfere. Once that he stepped in to prevent it, she flew out almost like a tigress, asking what business it was of his, that he should dare to come between her and them. The lesson was an effectual one; and he never interfered again. But the indulgence was telling on the naturally haughty disposition of the little Lord Elster; and not for good.

CHAPTER XII.

Riding the Pony.

As the days and weeks went on, and Lord and Lady Hartledon continued at Calne, there was one circumstance that began to impress itself on the former's mind in a careless sort of way — that he was constantly meeting with Pike. Go abroad when he would, he was sure to see Pike in some out-of-the-way spot; at a sudden turning, or peeping forth from under a group of trees, or staring at him from a roadside bank. One day in particular impressed itself on Lord Hartledon's memory. He was walking slowly along the road with Dr. Ashton, and found Pike was keeping pace with them softly on the other side the hedge, listening no doubt to what he could hear. It seemed as if the man was dodging him. On one of these occasions Lord Hartledon stopped and confronted him.

"What is it that you want, Mr. Pike?"

Perhaps Mr. Pike was about the last man in the world to be, as the saying runs, "taken to," and he stood his ground, and boldly answered "Nothing."

"It seems as though you did," said Val. "Go where I will, you are sure to spring up before me, or to be peeping and peering from some ambush as I walk along. It will not do: do you understand?"

"I was just a-thinking the same thing yester-

day — that your lordship was always meeting *me*," said bold Pike. "No offence on either side, I dare say."

Val walked on, throwing the man a significant look of warning, but vouchsafing no other reply. After that, Pike was a little more cautious, and kept aloof for a time: but Val knew that he was still watched on occasion.

One fine October day, when the grain had been gathered and the fields were bare with their stubble, the earl, alone in one of the front rooms, heard a sort of contest going on outside. Throwing up the window, he saw his young son attempting to mount the groom's pony: the latter was preventing him. At the door stood a small, low basket-carriage, the fellow pony harnessed in it. They belonged to Lady Hartledon; sometimes she drove one in the carriage; and the groom, a young lad of fourteen, very light and slim, rode the other: sometimes both ponies were in the carriage; and on those occasions the boy sat by her side, and drove.

"What's the matter, Edward?" called out Lord Hartledon to his son.

"Young lordship wants to ride the pony to-day, my lord," spoke up the groom, touching his hat. "My lady ordered me to ride it."

At this juncture Lady Hartledon appeared on the scene, ready for her drive. She had intended to take her little son with her — as she mostly did — but the child boisterously demanded that he should ride the pony for once, and she weakly yielded. Lord Hartledon's private opinion, looking on, was

that she was literally incapable of denying him any earthly thing he chose to demand. He went out.

"He had better go with you in the carriage, Maude."

"Not at all. He sits very well now, and the pony's quiet and docile."

"But he is too young to ride by the side of any vehicle. It is not safe. Let him sit with you as usual."

"Nonsense! Edward, darling, you shall ride the pony, Help him up, Ralph."

"I say no, Maude. He —"

"Will you be quiet?" said Lady Hartledon, bending her dark face towards her husband, and speaking in a low tone. "It is not for you to interfere. Would you deny him every thing?"

A strangely bitter expression sat on the earl's lips. Not of anger; not even of mortification; but of sad, cruel pain. He said no more.

And the cavalcade started. Lady Hartledon driving, the boy-groom sitting with her, and my young Lord Elster's short legs striding the pony. They were only going in the park, she called out to her husband, and she should keep at a foot-pace.

There was no real danger, as the earl believed: only he did not like the child's wilful tempers to be thus given way to. With a deep sigh, he turned indoors for his hat, and went strolling down the avenue, he cared not much whither. Mrs. Capper dropped a curtsy as he passed the lodge.

"Have you heard from your son yet?" he asked.

"Yes, my lord, many thanks to you. The school suits him bravely."

Turning out of the gates, he saw Floyd the miller walking slowly along. The man had been confined to his bed for weeks in the summer, with an attack of what the doctors called acute rheumatism, and to the house afterwards. It was the first time they had met since that morning long and long ago, when the miller brought up the portmonnaie. Lord Hartledon did not know him at first, he was so altered; pale, thin, reduced.

"Is it you, Mr. Floyd?"

"It's what's left of me, my lord."

"And that's not much; but I am glad to see you so far well," said the earl in the usual kindly tone. "I have heard reports of you from Mr. Hillary."

"Your lordship's altered too."

"Am I?"

"Well, it seems to me. But it's some few years now since I saw you. Nothing has ever come to light about that pocket-book, my lord."

"I conclude not, or I should have heard of it."

"And your lordship never came down to see the place!"

"No. I left Hartledon directly; the same day, I think, or the next. After all, Floyd, I don't see that it is of any use looking into these painful things: it cannot bring the dead back to life."

"And that's true," said the miller.

He was walking into Calne. Lord Hartledon kept by his side, talking now of this, now of that. The earl promised to be as popular a man as his father had been: and that was saying a great deal. When they came opposite the rectory, Lord Hartledon wished

him good-day and better strength, in his hearty manner, and turned in at the rector's gates.

About once a week now he was in the habit of calling on Mrs. Ashton. Peace was between them; and these visits of his to her sick-chamber were strangely welcome to her heart. She had loved Val Elster all her life, and she loved him now more than ever, in spite of the past. For Val was curiously subdued: and his present mood, or temperament, or whatever you please to call it, sad, quiet, thoughtful, was more endearing than his gayer one had been. Mrs. Ashton did not fail to read that he was a disappointed man, one with some heavy care upon him.

Anne was in the hall when he entered, talking to a poor applicant who was waiting to see the rector. Lord Hartledon smiled and lifted his hat to her; but he did not offer to shake hands. He had never presumed to touch her hand since the reconciliation: in fact, he scarcely ever saw her.

"How is Mrs. Ashton to-day?"

"A little better, I think, thank you, Lord Hartledon. She will be glad to see you."

He followed the servant upstairs, and Anne turned to the woman again. Mrs. Ashton was in an easy-chair near the window; he drew one close, and sat down with her hand in his.

"But you are looking famously to-day, do you know," he began in his most cheerful tones, gay almost as those of the light-hearted Val Elster; for he was given to cheer up all the invalids he came near.

"What is it?" The cap?"

"The cap of course. Don't you see it has bloom-

ing pink ribbons in it? Ah, Val, your favourite colour used to be pink. Do you recollect?"

"I recollect every thing. But indeed and in truth you look better, dear Mrs. Ashton."

"Yes, better to-day," she said with a sigh. "I shall fluctuate to the end, I suppose; one day better, the next worse. Val, I think sometimes it is not far off now."

Very far off, he knew it could not be. But he spoke of hope still: it was in his nature to do so. In the depths of his heart, so hidden from the world, there seemed to be hope for the whole living creation, except for him.

"How is your wife to-day?"

"Quite well, thank you. She and Edward are out with the ponies and carriage."

"She never comes so see me."

"She does not go to see any one. Though well, she's not very strong yet."

"Ah, she's young, she'll get so. I shall only get weaker. I am brave to-day; but you should have seen me last night. So prostrate! I almost doubted whether I should rise from my bed again. I do not think you will have to come here many more times."

"O, Mrs. Ashton!"

"A little sooner or a little later, what does it signify, I try to ask myself; but parting is parting, and my heart aches sometimes to pain. One of my aches will be the leaving you."

"Only a very minor one, then," he said, with deprecation; but the tears shone in his violet-blue eyes.

"No; not a minor one. I have loved you as a son of my own, always. I never loved you more

Percival, than when that letter of yours came to me at Cannes."

It was the first time she had alluded to it: the letter written the evening of his marriage. Val's face turned red all over, for his perfidy rose up before him in its full extent of shame.

"I don't care to speak of that," he whispered. "If you only knew what my humiliation has been!"

"Not of that; no; I don't know why I mentioned it. But I want you to speak of something else, Val. Over and over again has it been on my lips to ask it. What is the secret trouble that is weighing you down?"

A far greater change, than the one called up by recollection and its shame, came over his face now. He did not speak; and Mrs. Ashton continued. She was holding his hands as he bent towards her.

"I have seen it all along. At first — I don't mind confessing it to you, Val, for you seem to draw from me entire confidence, and there's no fear of your mistaking me — I took it for granted that you were on ill terms with yourself on account of the past: I feared there was something wrong between you and your wife, and that you were regretting Anne. But I soon threw that idea from me, to replace it with a graver one."

"What graver one?" he asked.

"Nay, I know not. I want you to tell me. Will you?"

He shook his head with an unmistakable gesture of denial, pressing unconsciously her hands to pain.

"Why not?"

"You have just said I am dear to you," he whispered; "I believe I am."

"Very dear. As dear, I think, as my own children."

"Then do not even wish to know it. It is an awful secret; and I must bear it without sympathy of any sort, alone and in silence. It has been upon me for some years now, taking the sweetness out of my daily bread; and it will, I suppose, go with me to my grave. Not scarcely to lift it off my shoulders, would I impart it to *you*."

She sighed deeply; she thought it must be connected with some of his youthful follies — his debts: possibly he had brought embarrassment of that nature upon him. But she loved him still; she had faith in him; she believed that he went wrong by misfortune more than by fault.

"Courage ever, Val," she whispered, the tears in her own soft eyes. "There is a better world than this, where sorrow and sighing cannot enter. Patience — and hope — and trust in God! — always bearing onwards. In time we shall attain to it."

Lord Hartledon gently drew his hands away, and turned to the window for a minute's respite. His eyes were greeted with the sight of one of his own servants, approaching the rectory at full speed, some half-dozen idlers behind him.

With a prevision that something was wrong, Lord Hartledon said a word of adieu to Mrs. Ashton, went down, and met the man outside. Dr. Ashton, who had seen the approach, also hurried out.

There had been some accident in the park, the man said. The pony had swerved and thrown Lord

Elster: thrown him right under the other pony's feet, as it seemed. The servant made rather a bungle over his news, but this was the substance.

"And the result? Is he much hurt?" asked the earl, constraining his voice and manner to calmness.

"Well, no; not hurt at all, apparently, my lord. He was up again soon, saying he'd lash the pony for throwing him. He don't seem hurt a bit."

"Then, man, why need you have alarmed us so," interrupted Dr. Ashton quickly and reprov-
ingly.

"Well, sir, it's her ladyship that seems hurt — or something," cried the man.

Lord Hartledon looked at him.

"What is it that you have come to tell, Richard? Speak out."

Apparently Richard could not speak out. His lady had been frightened and fainted, and did not come-to again. "Did not come-to again," he continued to harp upon. Lord Hartledon set off on the run, fast as his fleet legs would carry him.

The people standing about in the park here and there — for even this slight accident had gathered together its idlers — seemed to look at Lord Hartledon curiously as he passed them. Close upon the house he met Ralph. The boy was crying.

"'Twasn't no fault of anybody's, my lord; and there ain't any damage to the ponies," he began, hastening to excuse himself, and sobbing violently. "The little lord only slid off, and they stood as quiet as quiet. There wasn't no cause for my lady's fear."

"Is she fainting still?"

"They say she's — dead."

The boy brought out the last word with a burst. Lord Hartledon pressed onwards, and met Mr. Hillary at the hall-door. The surgeon took his arm and drew him into an empty room.

"Hillary! is it true?"

"I'm afraid it is."

Lord Hartledon felt his sight fail him. For a moment he was like a man groping in the dark. Steadying himself against the wall, he learned the details.

The child's pony had swerved, Ralph could not tell at what, and Lady Hartledon did not survive to tell. She was looking at him at the time, and saw him flung under the feet of the other pony, or slip under, and she rose up in the carriage with a loud shriek, and then fell back into the seat again. Ralph jumped out and picked up the child, who was not hurt at all; but when he hastened to tell her this, he saw that she seemed to have no life in her. One of the servants, Richard, happened to be going through the park, within sight; others soon came up; and while Lady Hartledon was being driven home Richard ran for Mr. Hillary, and then sought for his master, whom he found at the rectory. The surgeon had found her dead.

"It must have been instantaneous," he observed in a low tone, as he concluded these particulars. One great consolation is, that she was spared suffering."

"And its cause?" breathed Lord Hartledon.

"The heart. I don't entertain the least doubt of it."

"You said she had no heart-disease. Others said it."

"I said, if she had it, it was not developed. Sudden death from it is not at all uncommon where the disease has never been suspected."

And this was all the conclusion come to in the case of Lady Hartledon. Examination proved the surgeon's surmise to be correct; and in answer to a certain question put by the earl, he said the death was entirely irrespective of any trouble, or care, or annoyance she might have had in the past: irrespective of any shock even, except the shock of fear at the moment of death, caused by seeing the child thrown; that, and that alone, had wrought the fatal blow. Percival, Lord Hartledon, listened to this, and went away alone and fell on his knees, in devout thankfulness to Heaven that he was so far innocent.

"If she had not given way to the child!" he bitterly aspirated in the first moments of sorrow.

That the Countess Dowager should come posthaste and invade Hartledon, was of course only natural; and the earl strove not to rebel against it, even in heart. But she made herself so intensely and disagreeably officious, that his patience was sorely tried. Her first act was to insist on a grand and stately funeral. The earl had given orders for one quiet and plain; but she would have her wish carried out, and raved about the house in an unseemly fashion, abusing him for his meanness and lack of respect to his dead wife. For peace' sake, Lord Hartledon was fain to give her her way; and the funeral was made as costly as she pleased. Thomas Carr came down to it; and the Countess Dowager was barely civil to him.

Her next care was to assume the entire management of the two children, putting Lord Hartledon's authority over them at virtual, if not actual defiance. The death of her daughter was in truth a severe blow to the Dowager; not from love, for she really possessed no natural affection at all, but from fear that she should lose her footing in the house, so desirable a refuge. As a preliminary guard against this, she began endeavouring to make it more firm and secure. Altogether she was rendering Hartledon unbearable; and the earl would often escape from it, his boy in his hand, and take refuge with Mrs. Ashton.

That Lord Hartledon's love for his children was intense, there could be no question; but it was nevertheless of a peculiarly reticent nature. He had rarely, if ever, been seen to caress them. The boy told tales of how his papa would clasp him, kiss him, even weep over him, in solitude; but he would not give him so much as a kiss, scarcely even an endearing name, in the presence of others. Poor Maude had called him all the pet names in a fond mother's vocabulary — my darling, my precious, my love; Lord Hartledon always called him Edward, and without (as the Dowager wrathfully expressed it) any tail to it, behind or before.

A few evenings after the funeral had taken place, Mirrable, who had been into Calne on an errand, was hurrying back at dusk. As she passed Jabez Gum's gate, the clerk's wife was standing at it, talking to Lydda Jones. The two were laughing: Mrs. Gum seemed in rather a less depressed state than usual, and the other less snappish.

"Goodness, is it you!" exclaimed Mrs. Jones, as

Mirrabable stopped. "Talk of the devil, and you'll see his horns.' I was just saying I'd not set eyes on you in your new mourning."

"And laughing over it," returned Mirrabable.

"That's all your guess is good for!" was Mrs. Jones's retort. "I'd been telling of a trick I served Jones, and Nance was splitting her sides at it. My word! silk and crape! It's fine to be you!"

She had given a spin to Mirrabable, in her rude and unceremonious fashion, for the purpose of feasting her eyes on her attire. A whole shower of envy went out of them.

"Now then, Lydda Jones! Is that your way of turning a body about? How's Jabez, Nancy?"

"Jabez is gone to Garchester," replied Mrs. Gum, who had a fashion of giving indirect answers. "I thought I was never going to see you again, Mary."

"You could not expect to see me while the house was in its recent state of distress," answered Mirrabable. "We have been all in a bustle, as you may suppose."

"You've not had many staying there."

"Only Mr. Carr; and he went back to-day. We've got the old Countess Dowager still."

"And likely to have her, if all's true that's said," put in Mrs. Jones, who was fingering curiously the silk of Mirrabable's gown.

Mirrabable tacitly admitted the probability. Her private opinion was that nothing short of a miracle, or a positive exercise of Lord Hartledon's will, could ever remove the Dowager Kirton from the house again. Had any body told Mirrabable, there, as she stood, that

her ladyship would be leaving of her own accord that night, she had simply disbelieved it as an impossibility.

"If this silk hasn't got cotton in it, my fingers have got no feel for cotton," irascibly spoke Mrs. Jones, whose cranky nature was resuming its sway. "You've been finely took in, Mary Mirrable!"

"Do let my gown alone, Lyddy! It's not for your wear."

"No, thank goodness," replied Lydda, her nose going into the air after the manner of the fox looking up at the grapes. "When I do get a silk, I like a good one."

"I say, Mary," cried the weak voice of poor timid Mrs. Gum, "how was it none of the brothers came to the funeral? Jabez was wondering. She's got a lot, I've heard."

"Had a lot, you should say; my lady's gone," corrected Mirrable. "It was not convenient to them, I suppose. The one that lives in the Isle of Wight had gone out cruising in somebody's yacht, or else he'd have come with the Dowager; and Lord Kirton telegraphed from Ireland that he was prevented coming. I know nothing about the rest."

"What an awful thing it was!" shivered Mrs. Gum. "And to have died like that without cause; for the child was not hurt after all? Isn't he dreadfully cut up, Mary?"

"The child?"

"Lord Hartledon."

"I think he is; he's very quiet and subdued. But he has seemed to me full of sorrow for a long while, as if he had some dreadful care upon him. I don't

think he and his wife were very happy together from the first," added Mirrable. "But you needn't go tattling that all over Calne, Lydda Jones."

"As if Calne didn't know it without your telling!" retorted Lydda. "Witness her coming down here alone after the marriage; and he, when he did come, looking like a walking ghost. *I* saw him; and spoke to him, though he did stop but a day or two, which is more than many can say. And he never once came down with her again till this summer."

"My lord's likely to make it his chief residence now, I fancy," remarked Mirrable.

"Why d'you fancy that?" returned Lydda Jones, in the peculiarly abrupt, ungracious tone that characterised her.

"Because this morning, when he was speaking to me about the — My gracious! what's that?"

A crash, as if a whole kitchen battery of hardware, crockery, and glass had come down, was heard inside the house. A moment of staring consternation ensued, and nervous Mrs. Gum looked fit to faint.

"Whatever's Tilly at?"

"Take care," cried Lydda Jones; "I'll be on to her." And pushing the clerk's wife aside, she flew up the path. Tilly was her own daughter, and had replaced Miss Becca, who had rushed into an early marriage with a gentleman that swept chimneys. Mrs. Gum followed, a vision of every earthly breakable thing gone, that the house contained, flashing across her brain.

"Good evening, Nancy," called out Mirrable. "I can't stay to come in."

The two women disappeared indoors, and Mirrable

turned towards home at a brisk pace. But she was not to go on without an interruption. Pike's head suddenly appeared above the hurdles, and he began inquiring, rather affectionately, after her health. "Toothache gone?" asked he.

"Yes, it's gone," she said, answering straightforwardly in her surprise. "How did you know I had the toothache?" she added, staring at the man. It was not the first time by several that he had thus accosted her; and to give her her due, she was always passably civil to him. Perhaps she feared to be otherwise.

"I heard on't. And so my Lord Hartledon's like a man that's got some dreadful care upon him!" he went on. "What is the care?"

"You have been eaves-dropping!" she angrily exclaimed.

"Not a bit on't. I was seated under the hedge with my pipe, and you three women set on a-talking. I didn't tell ye to. Well, what's his lordship's care?"

"Just mind your own business, will you, and his lordship will mind his," she retorted. "You'll get interfered with in a way you won't like, Pike, one of these days, unless you mind your manners."

"A great care on him," nodded Pike to himself, looking after her, as she walked off in a sort of fury. "A great care! *I* know. One of these fine days, my lord, I may be asking you questions about it on my own score. I might long afore this, but for —"

The sentence broke off abruptly, and ended with a growled curse at things in general. Mr. Pike was evidently not in a genial mood.

His residence in that shed had grown into a matter

of course with Calne, just as his presence had. Lord Hartledon and his steward gave no orders for his ejection; and even Lydda Jones could bring no ill-deed home to the man, by which his liberty might be imperilled. How he lived, how he had lived during these years of sojourn, was as great a problem as ever. A letter never came to him, as the postman could testify; a friend never visited him; and whence he obtained the trifle of money necessary for his bare subsistence could not even be conjectured. Save that time, which softens down all marvels, had softened this in people's minds, Mr. Pike and his doings remained as great a mystery as they had ever been.

Mirrable got home to find the Countess Dowager in a state more easily imagined than described. Some blessed sprite, favourable to the peace of invaded Hartledon and its inmates, had been writing to her confidentially from Ireland, regarding Kirton and his doings. That her eldest son was about to steal a march on her and marry again, seemed almost indisputably clear; and the miserable Dowager, dancing her war-dance and uttering shriek upon shriek, reproach on reproach, was repacking her boxes in hot haste. Those boxes, which she had fondly hoped would never again leave Hartledon, unless it might be for sojourns in Park Lane! She was going back to Ireland to mount guard over him, and prevent any such escapade. Only in September had she quitted him — and then had been as nearly ejected as a son could eject with any decency — and had taken the Isle of Wight on her way to Hartledon. The son who lived in the Isle of Wight had espoused a widow twice his own age, with seven hundred a-year, and a house and a car-

riage; so that he had a home: which the Countess Dowager sometimes remembered.

Lord Hartledon was liberal. He gave her a handsome sum of ready-money for her journey, and a cheque besides; most devoutly praying that she might stop keeping guard over Kirton for ever, and never come off it again. He escorted her to the station himself in the close carriage, submitting cheerfully to the mountain of boxes outside, at which all Calne came out to stare.

And the same week, confiding his children to the joint care of Mirrable and their nurse — an efficient, kind, and judicious woman — the Earl of Hartledon departed from home and England for a sojourn on the Continent, long or short, as inclination led him, feeling like a bird released from its cage.

CHAPTER XIII.

Coming Home.

SOME eighteen months subsequent to the last chapter, a travelling carriage-and-four dashed up to the Earl of Hartledon's house in Park Lane, one wet evening in spring. It contained the earl and his second wife. They were expected, and several servants were assembled in the hall.

Lord Hartledon led her into their midst, proudly, affectionately; as he had never in his life led any other. Ah, you need not ask who she was; he had contrived to win her, to win over Dr. Ashton; and his heart's love at length had found its rest. Her sweet-looking countenance, her thoughtful eyes and sunny smile were turned on the servants, thanking them for their greeting.

"All well, Hedges?" asked the earl.

"Quite well, my lord," was the butler's reply. "But we are not alone."

"No!" said the earl, stopping short in his progress. "Who's here?"

"The Countess Dowager of Kirton, my lord," replied Hedges, glancing at Lady Hartledon, in momentary hesitation, before he spoke.

"O, indeed," said the earl, as if not enjoying the information. "Just see, Hedges, will you, that the things inside the carriage are taken out. Don't come up, Mrs. Ball; I will take Lady Hartledon to her rooms."

It was the light-hearted Val of the old, old days; his face seemed free from care, his voice was gay. He did not turn into any of the reception-rooms; he led his wife at once to her chamber. It was nearly dinner-time, and he knew she was tired.

"Welcome home, my darling!" he whispered tenderly ere releasing her. "A thousand welcomes to you, my dear, dear wife!"

Tears rose to his eyes with the fervour of the wish. Heaven alone knew what the past had been; the contrast between that time and this.

"I'll dress at once, Percival," she said, after a few moments' pause. "I must see your children before dinner."

"Your children also, Anne, from henceforth."

"O yes, yes! I trust, Heaven helping me, I shall love them and always act by them as if they were my own."

"I am so sorry she is here, Anne — that woman. You heard Hedges say Lady Kirton had arrived," he added in reply to his wife's look. "She has chosen her visit inopportunistically. It is ill-timed."

"I shall be pleased to welcome her, Val."

"It is more than I shall be," replied the earl, as his wife's maid came into the room, and he quitted it. "I'll bring the children to you, Anne."

They had been married nearly five weeks. Anne had not seen the children for several months. The little Viscount Elster had shown symptoms of delicacy, and for nearly a year the children had sojourned at the seaside, having been brought home to the town-house just before the earl's marriage.

The nursery was empty, and the earl went down.

Lingering in the passage outside the drawing-room was confidential Hedges. He was evidently waiting for his master, and had a budget to unfold.

"When did she come, Hedges?"

"My lord, it was directly after your marriage; only a few days," replied Hedges, in a low tone. "She arrived in the most outrageous tantrum — if I shall not offend your lordship by saying so — and she has been here ever since, completely upsetting every thing."

"There's no offence, Hedges. Tell it out."

"On account of your having married again, my lord. She stood in the hall for five minutes when she got here, dancing like mad — your lordship knows what it used to be — in the face and eyes of all the servants, for the noise brought them up; and saying the most audacious things against your lordship and Miss Ashton — I mean my lady," added Hedges, correcting himself.

"The old hag!" muttered his lordship. "No disrespect to the late Lady Hartledon, in saying so," he observed, as if he would apologise for his word, "but she *is* a hag."

"I think she's insane at times, my lord, that's what I think; I'm sure the fits of passion she flies into are bad enough for insanity. The house-keeper told me this morning that she feared she would be capable of striking my lady, when she first saw her. I'm afraid, too, she has been tutoring the children."

The earl, with a dark brow and haughty step, strode into the drawing-room. There, as large as life — and a great deal larger in breadth than most lives — stood the Dowager Countess of Kirton. She looked

shorter and broader than she used to look, and her snub nose was redder, and her flaxen curls were a little awry. All as it was formerly, even to the dress. The turban was her favourite colour of pea-green, the gown was pink, with its innumerable flounces and its quilled white-net tails; but she was not yet dressed for dinner. Fortunately she had not heard the arrival: in fact, she had dropped into a doze while waiting for it; and she started up at sight of the earl.

Fancy the bedecked and stout old figure, as you have had to fancy it before, beginning her wild dance of passion, and whirling round in circles, as if she were a true red Indian.

"How are you, ma'am?" asked his lordship. "You have taken me by surprise."

"Not half as much as your wicked letter took me," screamed the old dancer. "O, you vile man! to marry again in this haste! — you — you — I can't find words that my tongue would not be ashamed of; but Hamlet's mother, in the play, was nothing to it."

"It is some time since I read that," returned the earl, controlling his temper under an assumption of careless indifference. "If my memory serves me, the 'funeral baked meats did, coldly, furnish forth the marriage table.' *My* late wife has been dead eighteen months, Lady Kirton."

"Eighteen months! for such a wife as Maude was to you!" violently danced the Dowager. "You ought to have mourned her eighteen years. Any body else would. I wish I had never let you have her."

The earl wished it likewise, with all his heart and soul; had wished it in his lady's lifetime.

"I might have known better than to suffer you to cajole me out of her: I —"

"Stay, madam," interrupted Lord Hartledon; "if you will cast your thoughts back, you may remember that instead of your being cajoled out of her, I was cajoled into her. But to recriminate in this way is beneath both of us, and disrespectful to the memory of your daughter."

"How dare you say 'your daughter'?" asked the Dowager, taking umbrage at the word. "Wasn't she your wife?"

"So, that offends you, does it? My wife, then. But there is no necessity, I say, to bring up Maude's name: let it be dropped."

"Dropped; yes! To give place to this new creature; your old flame, your parson's daughter. A reputable young woman she must be, to force herself indecently into Maude's shoes. I always thought her one."

O Val, control your temper! you have need to do it. He imperiously raised his hand for silence, and his face was working with anger. But who could arrest the tongue of the Countess Dowager, and she danced on.

"Madam, will you listen to me! Let us understand each other. Your visit here is ill-timed; you ought to feel it so; nevertheless, if you stay it out, you must observe good manners. I shall be compelled to request you to terminate it, if you fail one iota in the respect due to this house's mistress, my beloved and honoured wife."

The Dowager stopped in her dancing. Though not whirling so violently as at first, she was still shuffling

on her two feet; a habit which certainly increased with her years.

"Your *beloved* wife, Val Hartledon! Do you dare to say it to me?"

"Ay; beloved, doubly beloved; and honoured and respected as no woman has ever been by me yet, or ever will be," he replied, speaking too plainly in his warmth.

"What a false-hearted monster!" cried the Dowager shrilly, apostrophising the walls and the mirrors, as she successively faced them in her turnings. "What then was Maude?"

"Maude is gone, and I counsel you not to bring up her name to me," said the earl sternly. "Your treachery forced Maude upon me; and let me tell you now, Lady Kirton, if I have never told you before, that it wrought upon her the most bitter wrong possible to be inflicted; which she lived to know. I was a vacillating two-minded simpleton, and you held me in your trammels. The less we rake up old matters the better. Things have altered. I am altered: the moral courage I once lacked does not fail me now; and I have at least sufficient to hold my own against the world, and protect from insult the young lady I have made my wife. I beg your pardon if my words seem harsh; they are true; and I am sorry you have forced them from me."

She was standing still for a minute, rubbing her face and staring at him, not altogether certain of her ground.

"Where are the children?" he asked.

"Where you can't get at them," she rejoined hotly.

"You have got your beloved wife; you don't want them."

He rang the bell, louder than he need have done; but his usually sweet temper was boiling up with its provocation. A footman came in.

"Tell the nurse to bring the children here."

"They are not at home, my lord."

"Not at home! Surely they are not out in this rain! — and so late!"

"They went out this afternoon, my lord: they have not come in, I believe."

"There, that will do, James," tartly interposed the Dowager. "You don't know any thing about it, and you may go. Shut the door."

"Lady Kirton, where are the children?"

"Where you can't get at them, I say," was Lady Kirton's response, wagging her flaxen front and her blooming face at the questioner. "You don't think I am going to suffer Maude's children to be domineered over by a wretch of a stepmother, — perhaps poisoned."

He seized hold of her arm in his wrath, his eyes flashing.

"Madam!"

"O, you need not 'Madam' me. Maude's gone, and I shall act for her."

"I ask you where my children are?"

"I have sent them away. There; you may make your most of the information. And when I have remained here as long as I choose, I shall take them with me, and keep them, and bring them up."

"Bring them up like you brought up —"

Val checked his speech; it was probably one he

would afterwards have regretted; and the Dowager took the opportunity to continue hers.

"And you can at once decide what sum you will allow me for their education and maintenance, and for two maids, and a tutor, and a governess, and masters, and clothes, and toys, and pocket-money. It must be a handsome sum, take notice — for I won't be cramped — and be paid quarterly in advance. And I mean to rent a house in London for their accommodation, and shall expect you to pay the rent."

The exceeding coolness with which this was delivered turned Val's angry feelings into amusement. He could not help laughing as he looked at her.

"You cannot have my children, Lady Kirton."

"They are Maude's children," snapped the Dowager.

"But I presume you admit that they are likewise mine. And I shall certainly not part with them."

"Percival Hartledon," cried the Dowager, her turban and her gauzes and her white tails fluttering round like the sails of a windmill, "if you oppose me in this, I'll put them into Chancery. I am their nearest relative and next of kin, and I have a right to them."

"Nearest relative and next of kin!" he repeated. "You must have lost your senses. I am their father."

"And have you lived to see thirty, and never learnt that men don't count for any thing in the bringing up of infants?" shrilly asked the Dowager. "If they had ten fathers, what's that in the Lord Chancellor's court? No more than ten blocks of wood. What they want is a mother."

"And I have now given them one," replied the earl.

The Countess Dowager was beside herself, and "said something like swearing," as Lord Byron has it in one of his noted fragmentary poems, in reference to a certain chief-justice. She shrieked out for her bonnet: she would go off then, and throw the children into Chancery.

"You had better throw yourself into Chancery," retorted Val; "but as to my children, they are not eligible candidates; and to talk in this manner is the height of absurdity. I would not have allowed you their guardianship under any circumstances."

The Dowager's flounces upset a chair or two, and the earl left her. He said true, that he would never have allowed her their guardianship. He knew how she hated children: he knew that her sole object in wishing for his was to establish a sort of home for herself.

With the red spot of emotion on his cheek he went up to his wife's room. She was alone then, dressed, and just coming out of it. He put his arm round her waist to draw her in again, as he shortly explained the annoyance their visitor was causing.

"You must stay here, my dearest, until I can go down with you," he added. "She is in a vile humour, and I do not choose for you to encounter her, unprotected by me."

"But where are you going, Val?"

"Well, I really think I shall get a policeman in, and frighten her into saying what she has done with the children. She'll never tell unless she's forced."

Anne laughed, and the earl went down. He had

in good truth a great mind to see what the effect would be. The old woman was not a reasonable being, and he felt disposed to show her but little consideration. As he stood at the hall-door gazing forth, who should pass but Thomas Carr. Not altogether by accident; he had come up exploring, to see if there were signs of the earl's return.

"Ah, what! come home, Hartledon!"

"Carr, what blessed wind blew you hither?" cried Val, as he grasped the hands of his true friend. "You can terrify this woman with the thunders of the law if she persists in kidnapping children that don't belong to her." And he forthwith explained the state of affairs.

Mr. Carr laughed.

"She will not keep them away long. She is no fool, that Countess Dowager. It is a ruse, no doubt, to induce you to give them up to her."

"Give them up to her, indeed!" the earl was beginning, when Hedges advanced to him.

"Mrs. Ball says the children have only gone to Madame Tussaud's, my lord," quoth he. "The nurse told her so when they went out."

"I wish she was stuck there herself, one of Madame Tussaud's figure-heads!" cried Val. "Mr. Carr dines here, Hedges. — Nonsense, Carr; you can't excuse yourself. Never mind your coat; Anne won't. I want you to make acquaintance with her."

"How did you contrive to win over Dr. Ashton?" asked Thomas Carr, as he went in with the earl.

"I put the matter before him in its true light," answered Val, a twinkle of merriment in his eyes, — "asking him whether, if Anne forgave me, he would

condemn us both to continued punishment, to live out our lives — and both of us so young — apart: or whether he would not act the part of a good and Christian man, and give her to me, that I might strive to atone for the past.”

“And he did?”

“After a great deal of trouble. There’s not time to tell you the details. I had a powerful advocate in Anne’s heart. She had never forgotten me, for all my misconduct.”

“You have been a lucky man at last, taking one thing with another.”

“You may well say it,” was the answer, in a tone of deep feeling. “Moments come over me when I fear I am about to awake and find the present a dream. I am only now beginning to *live*. The past few years have been — you know what, Carr.”

He sent the barrister into the drawing-room empty now, and ran upstairs for Anne, and brought her in on his arm. The Countess Dowager was in her chamber, attiring herself in haste.

“My wife, Carr,” said the earl, with a loving emphasis on the word. She was in an evening dress of white and black, not having yet put off the mourning for Mrs. Ashton, and looked very lovely; far more lovely in Thomas Carr’s eyes than Lady Maude, with her dark, haughty beauty, had ever looked. She held out her hand to him with a frank smile.

“I have heard so much of you, Mr. Carr, that we seem like old friends. I am glad you have come to see me so soon.”

“My being here this evening is an accident, Lady Hartledon, as you may see by my dress,” he returned.

"I ought rather to apologise for intruding on you in the hour of your arrival."

"Don't talk about intrusion, Carr," said Val. "You will never be an intruder in my house — and Anne's smile is telling you the same thing. She —"

"Who's that, pray?"

The interruption came from the Countess Dowager of Kirton, and the party turned. There she stood, near the door, her pink-gauze dress exchanged for a yellow one, and the pea-green turban for something with spangles. Val drew himself up and approached her, his wife still on his arm.

"Madam," said he, in reply to her question, "it is the Countess of Hartledon."

The Dowager's gauzes made acquaintance with the carpet in so elaborate a curtsy as to savour of mockery, but her eyes were turned up to the ceiling; not a look or a word gave she to the young lady.

"The other one I meant," cried she, nodding towards Thomas Carr.

"It is my friend Mr. Carr. You appear to have forgotten him."

"I hope you are well, madam," said he, advancing towards her.

Another curtsy, and the Countess Dowager fanned herself, and sailed towards the fireplace.

Meanwhile the children came home in a cab from Madame Tussaud's; and dinner was announced. Lord Hartledon was obliged to take down the Countess Dowager, resigning his wife to Mr. Carr. The dinner passed off pretty well, the Dowager being too fully occupied with the viands and the wines to be annoying; also the good cheer caused her temper to thaw a little.

Afterwards, the children came in; Lord Elster, a bold, free boy, turned five, who walked straight up to his grandmother, saluting nobody; and Maude, a timid, delicate little thing, who stood still in the middle of the carpet, where the maid placed her.

The Dowager was just then too busy making pineapple salad to pay attention to the children, but Anne held out her hand with an inviting smile. Upon which the little lady drew up to her father, and hid her face in his coat.

He took her up, gave her a strawberry, and, whilst she was eating it, carried her to his wife and placed her upon her knee. "Maude, my pet," whispered he in her ear, "this is your mamma, and you must love her very much, because she loves you."

Anne's arms fondly encircled the child; but she began to scream fearfully and struggle to get down.

"Ill manners, Maude," said the earl.

"She's afraid of her," spoke up the young viscount, who had the dark eyes and imperiously-beautiful features of his late mother. "We are always afraid of bad people."

The observation passed momentarily unnoticed, for Maude, whom Lady Hartledon had been obliged to release, would not be pacified. But when calm supervened, the earl turned to his son, just then assisting himself to some of the Dowager's salad.

"What did I hear you say about bad people, Edward?"

"She," answered the boy, pointing a slice of the dripping pineapple towards Lady Hartledon. "She sha'n't touch Maude. She's come here to beat us and to hate us, and I'll kick her if she touches me."

The earl choked down his passion. An unmistakable look at the Countess Dowager, and then he rose from his seat in silence and rang the bell. There could be no correction then in the presence of the Countess Dowager; he and Anne must undo her work alone. Carrying the little girl in one arm, he took the boy's hand, and met the servant at the door.

"Take these children back to the nursery."

"I want some dessert," called out the boy rebelliously.

"Not to-day," said the earl. "You know quite well that you have behaved ill."

His wife's face was painfully flushed — flushed to tears. Mr. Carr was critically examining the painted landscape on his handsome plate of Worcester china; and the spangles were bent over the champagne salad, enjoying it with perfect unconcern. Lord Hartledon stood an instant ere he resumed his seat.

"Anne," he said, in a voice that trembled in spite of its displeased tones, "allow me to beg your pardon, and I do it with heartfelt shame, that this gratuitous insult should have been offered you in my — in your house. A day or two will serve, I hope, to put matters on their right footing; the poor children, as you must see, have been tutored."

"Are you going to keep the port by you all day, Hartledon?"

Need you ask from whom the interruption came? Mr. Carr passed it across to her, leaving her to help herself; and Lord Hartledon sat down, biting his delicate lips.

When the Dowager seemed to have finished, Anne rose. Mr. Carr rose too as soon as they had retired,

"I have an engagement, Hartledon; I am obliged to run away. Make my adieu to your wife."

"Carr, is it not a crying shame? — enough to incense a man?"

"It is. The sooner you get rid of her the better."

"That's easier said than done. She was Maude's mother, after all."

When the earl reached the drawing-room, the spangles were snoring comfortably. Looking about for his wife, he found her in the small room Maude had used to make exclusively her own, which was not lighted up. She was standing at the window, crying. He drew her face to his own, feeling that he could cry with her.

"My darling, don't let it grieve you! We shall amend it all."

"O Percival, if the mischief should be irremediable! — if they should never look upon me but as a step-mother! You don't know how sick and timid this has made me feel! I wanted to go to them in the nursery when I came up, and I did not dare! Perhaps the nurse has also been prejudiced against me!"

"Come up with me now, love," he whispered.

They went silently upstairs, his arm still round her. But the children were then in bed and asleep. They were tired with the sight-seeing, the nurse said apologetically, curtsying to her new mistress.

The nurse withdrew, and they stood over the nursery fire, talking. Anne could scarcely account for the exceeding depression the event seemed to have thrown upon her. Lord Hartledon soon recovered his spirits, vowing he should like to "serve out" the Dowager.

"I was thankful for one thing, Val; that you did not show anger to them, poor little things. It would have made it worse."

"I was on the point of showing something more than anger to my young Master Edward; but the thought arose that I should be punishing him for another's fault, and it checked me. I wonder how we can get rid of her? She'll stick to us like a leech if we don't make a stand against it."

"We must strive to please and conciliate her while she stays."

"Please and conciliate!" he echoed. "Her! Anne, my dear, that is stretching Christian charity rather far."

Anne smiled. "I am a clergyman's daughter, you know."

"If she's wise, she'll abstain from offence to you in my presence. I'm not sure but I should lose command of myself, and pitch her out at the window."

"I don't fear that. She was quite civil when we came up from dinner, and ——"

"As she generally is then. She takes her share of wine."

"And asked me if I would excuse her falling into a doze, for she never felt well without it," continued Lady Hartledon.

Lady Hartledon was right. The cunning old woman changed her tactics, finding that those she had started on would not answer. It has been remarked before, if you remember, that she knew particularly well on which side her bread was buttered. Nothing could exceed her graciousness to the earl and countess from that evening. The past scene might have been a dream, for all that remained to show of it. Out of the house she was

determined not to go in anger; it was too desirable a harbour of refuge, as occasion required, for that. And on the following day, upon hearing my Lord Elster attempt some impudent speech to his new mamma, she put him across her knee, pulled off an old slipper she was wearing, and gave him a sound whipping with its fat sole. Anne interposed, the viscount roared; but the good lady whipped on.

"Don't put yourself out, dear Lady Hartledon. There's nothing so good for 'em as a sweet, wholesome whipping: I used to try it on my own."

CHAPTER XIV.

Mr. Pike on the Wing.

THE time went on. It may have been some twelve or thirteen months subsequently, that Mr. Carr, sitting alone in his chambers, late one evening, was surprised by the entrance of his clerk — who had a latch-key to the outer door as well as himself.

“Why, Taylor! what brings you here?”

“I thought you’d most likely be in, sir,” replied the clerk. “Do you remember some few years ago making inquiries about a man named Gorton — and you could not find him?”

“And never have found him,” was the comment of Mr. Carr. “Well?”

“I have seen him this evening, sir. He is back in London.”

Thomas Carr was not a man to be startingly affected by any communication; but nevertheless he felt the importance of this, for Lord Hartledon’s sake.

“I met him by chance, in a place where I go sometimes of an evening to smoke a cigar, and learnt his name by accident,” continued Mr. Taylor. “It is the same man that was at Kedge and Reck’s, George Gorton; he acknowledged it at once, quite readily.”

“And where has he been hiding himself?”

“He has been in Australia for several years, he says; went there directly after he left Kedge and Reck’s that autumn.”

"Could you get him here, Taylor?" asked the barrister. "I must see him. Look here; what coloured hair has he got?"

"Red, sir; and plenty of it. He says he's doing very well over there, and has only come home for a short change. He does not seem to be at all in concealment, and gave me his address readily when I asked him."

According to Mr. Carr's wish, the man Gorton was brought to his chambers on the following morning by Taylor. To the barrister's surprise, a well-dressed and really rather gentlemanly man entered, whose manners were good. He had been accustomed to picture this Gorton as a very Arab of London life. Casting a keen glance at the red hair, he saw it was indisputably his own.

A few rapid questions, which Gorton answered without the slightest demur, and Mr. Carr leaned back in his chair, knowing that all the trouble he had been at to find *this* man might have been spared: for he was not identical with the other George Gordon, as they had suspected. But Mr. Carr was cautious, and told nothing.

"I am sorry to have troubled you," he said. "When I inquired for you of Kedge and Reck some years ago, it was under the impression that you were some one else. You had left; and they did not know where to find you."

"Yes, I had displeased them through arresting a wrong man, and other things. I was down in the world then, and glad to do any thing for a penny, even serve writs."

"You arrested the late Lord Hartledon for his

brother," observed Mr. Carr, with a careless smile. "I heard of it. I suppose you did not know them apart."

"I had never set eyes on either of them before," returned Gorton; unconsciously confirming a point in the barrister's mind: which, however, was sufficiently obvious before.

"The man I wanted to find was named Gordon. I thought it just possible you might have changed yours temporarily: some of us find it convenient to do so on occasion."

"I never changed mine in my life."

"And if you had, I don't suppose you'd have changed it to one so notorious as George Gordon," said Mr. Carr, looking full at the other's countenance.

"Notorious?"

"It was a George Gordon who was the hero of that piratical affair; that mutiny on board the Morning Star."

"Ah, to be sure. And an awful villain too! A man I met in Australia knew Gordon well. But he tells a curious tale, though. He was a doctor, that Gordon; had come last from somewhere in Kirkcudbrightshire."

"Yes, he did," said Thomas Carr, quietly. "What curious tale does your friend tell?"

"Well, sir, he says — or rather said, for I've not seen him since my first visit there — that George Gordon did not sail in the Morning Star. That he was killed in a drunken brawl the night before he ought to have sailed; this man was present in it, and he saw him buried."

"But there's pretty good proof that Gordon did sail. He was the ringleader of the mutiny."

"Well, yes. I don't know how it could have been. The man was positive. I never knew Gordon; so that the affair did not much interest me."

"You are doing well over there?"

"Very well. I might retire, if I chose to live in a small way; but I mean to take a few years more of it, and go on to riches. Ah! and it was just the turn of a pin whether I went over there that second time, or whether I stopped in London to serve writs or to starve."

"Val was right," thought the barrister.

On the following Saturday Mr. Carr took a return-ticket, and went down to Hartledon: as he had once or twice before in the old days. Lord and Lady Hartledon had not come to town this season; did not intend to come: she was too happy in the birth of her baby-boy to care for London; and Val liked Hartledon better than any other place now.

In one single respect the past year had failed to bring Anne happiness — there was not entire confidence between herself and her husband. He had something on his mind, and she could not fail to see that he had. It was not, in fact, that awful, shivering dread that seemed to hold full possession in his first wife's time; but it was nevertheless a heavy weight, which told more or less on his spirits always. To Anne it appeared like a remorse for some deed done; but she might never have thought this, but for a word or two he let slip occasionally. Was it connected with his children? She could almost have fancied so: and yet in what manner could it be? His

behaviour to them was peculiar. He rather avoided them than not; but when with them, was almost passionately fond, exactingly jealous that respect should be paid to them: and he seemed half afraid of caressing Anne's baby, lest it should be thought he loved it better than the others. Altogether Lady Hartledon puzzled her brains in vain: she could not make him out. When she questioned him, he would deny that there was any thing at all the matter, and said it was her fancy.

They were at Hartledon alone: that is, without the Countess Dowager. That respected lady, though not actually domiciled with them during the past twelvemonth, had paid them three long visits. She was determined to retain her right in the household — if right it may be called; she was by far too wary to do otherwise; and her behaviour to Anne, when face to face with her, was mild as melted butter. But somehow she contrived to retain, or perpetually to renew, her evil influence over the minds and feelings of the children; though so insidiously was it done, that Lady Hartledon could never detect how or when, or openly meet it. Neither could she effectually counteract it. So sure as the Dowager came, so sure did the young viscount and his sister become spiteful to their step-mother; full of ill-nature and impudence. Lady Hartledon was kind, judicious, and good; and things would be remedied during the crafty Dowager's absences, so as to promise a complete cure; but whenever she returned, all the evil broke forth again. Anne was sorely perplexed: she did not like to deny the children access to their grandmother, who was more nearly related to them than she herself was; and she

could only pray that time would bring about a remedy, and hope some good star might put an end to the visits of the Countess Dowager. She passed her time pretty equally between their house and her son's, scheming to retain her influence in both. Lord Kirton had not married again, owing, perhaps, to the perpetual watch and ward kept over him: not for a day did she leave him when he was at his place in Ireland; but as soon as he started off from it to the Continent, or elsewhere, where she could not follow him, then off she came, without notice, by the first boat to England, and to Lord Hartledon's. And Val, in his good nature, bore the infliction passively, so long as she kept civil and peaceable.

In this respect her husband's behaviour puzzled Anne. Disliking the Dowager beyond every created being, he yet winked at her indulgence of his children; and if any little passage-at-arms did supervene, took her part rather than his wife's.

"I cannot understand you, Val," Anne said to him one day, in a tone of pain. "Don't you care for me? You are not like you used to be." And his only answer was to strain his wife to his bosom with an impassioned gesture of unmistakable love.

However, these were but episodes in their generally happy life. Never more happy, more free from any blighting external influence, than when Thomas Carr got down there on this identical Saturday. He went in unexpectedly: and Val's violet eyes, beautiful as ever, shone out their joyous welcome; and Anne, who happened to have her baby on her lap, blushed and smiled, as she held it out for the barrister's inspection.

"I dare not take it," said he. "You'd be up in arms if it got dropped. What's its name?"

"Reginald."

"And the next is to be Thomas, after you, Carr," called out the earl.

"O Val!"

"Nobody's attending to him, Lady Hartledon."

A little while, and she carried the child away, leaving them alone. Mr. Carr declined refreshment for the present; and he and the earl strolled out, arm-in-arm.

"I have brought you an item of news, Hartledon. Gorton has turned up."

"Not Gordon?"

"No. And what's more, Gorton never was Gordon. You were right, and I wrong. I'd have bet a ten-pound note — a great venture for a barrister — that the men were the same: never, in point of fact, had a doubt of it."

"You would not listen to me," said Val. "I told you I was sure that I could not have failed to recognise Gordon, had he been the one who was down at Calne with the writ."

"But you acknowledged that it might have been he, nevertheless; that his bushy red hair might have been false; that you never got a good distinct view of the man's face; that the only time you spoke with him, it was in the evening's dusk," reiterated Thomas Carr. "Well, as it turns out, we might have spared three parts of our pains and half our anxiety, for Gorton is himself, and never was any body else: a poor innocent sheriff's man, as far as you are concerned, who had

never in his life set eyes on the Honourable Val Elster until he went after him to Calne."

"Didn't I say so?" reiterated Val. "Didn't I always say that Gordon would have known me too well to arrest my brother for me?"

"But you admitted the general likeness between you and your brother; and that it was possible for the mistake to have occurred, considering that Gordon had not seen you for three years or more."

"Yes, I admitted all you say, and perhaps, after the question of the two being the same arose, I was a little doubtful myself: to a man living in fear, impossibilities assume the aspect of reality. But I soon shook off the doubt, and of late years have been as sure as I could be that the two were not identical with each other; and that Gordon was really dead. It has been an instinct; a something more than a conviction. But I always said there were no grounds for connecting the two."

"I had my grounds for doing it," remarked the barrister. "Gorton, it seems, has been in Australia ever since. No wonder that detective friend of mine, Mr. Green, could not unearth him in London. He's come back on a visit, looking like a gentleman; and really I can't find that there was ever any thing against him, except that he was down in the world. Taylor met with him the other day, and I had him brought to my chambers; and have told you the result. His red hair's his own, and is luxuriant enough for half-a-dozen modest-minded heads still."

"You do not now feel any doubt, Carr, that Gordon's dead?"

"None at all. Your friend, Gordon of Kirkcud-

bright, was the one who embarked, or ought to have embarked, on the good ship Morning Star, homeward bound," said Mr. Carr. And he forthwith told Lord Hartledon what the man had said.

There ensued a silence. Lord Hartledon was in deep and evidently not pleasant thought; and the barrister stole a glance at him.

"Hartledon, take comfort. I am of as cautious a nature, I believe, as it is well possible for any one to be; and I am *sure* the man is dead, that he can never rise up to trouble you."

"I have been sure of that for years," replied the earl quietly. "I have just said so."

"Then what is disturbing you?"

"O Carr, how can you ask it?" came the rejoinder, in a tone as if he had been stung. "What is it that lies on my mind day and night; that is wearing me out before my time? Discovery may be avoided; has been avoided; but when I look at the children — at the boy — I think it would have turned some men mad," he more quietly added, passing his hand across his brow. "So long as he lives, I cannot have much rest from pain. The sins of the fathers shall —"

"Yes, yes," interposed Mr. Carr hastily. "Still the case is light, compared to what we once dreaded."

"Light for me, heavy for him."

Mr. Carr remained with them until the Monday: he then went back to London and work; and time glided on again. An event occurred the following winter, which shall be related at once; and the more especially as nothing of moment took place in those intervening months needing special record.

The man Pike, who still occupied his shed undis-

turbed, had been for some time ailing. An attack of rheumatic fever in the summer had left him little better than a crippled skeleton. He crawled abroad still when he was able, and *would* do it, in spite of what Mr. Hillary said; would lie about the damp ground in a lawless gipsying sort of manner; but by the time winter came all that was over, and Mr. Pike's career, as foretold by the surgeon, was drawing very rapidly to a close. Mrs. Gum was the good Samaritan, as she had been in the fever some years before, going in and out and attending to him; and in a reasonable way Pike wanted for nothing.

"How long can I last?" he abruptly asked the doctor one morning. "Needn't fear to say; *she's* the only one that'll take on; I sha'n't."

He alluded to his nurse, Mrs. Gum, who had just gone out. The surgeon considered.

"Two or three days."

"As much as that?"

"I think so."

"Oh!" said Pike. "When it comes to the last day I should like to see the earl."

"Why the last day?"

The man's pinched features broke into a smile; pleasant and fair features once, with a gentle look upon them. The black wig and whiskers lay near; but the real hair, light and scanty, was pushed away from the damp brow.

"No use, then, to think of giving me up: no time left for it."

"I question if the earl would give you up, were you in rude health. I'm sure he'd not," added Mr. Hillary, endorsing his opinion rather emphatically. "If

ever there was a kindly nature in the world, it's his. What do you want with him?"

"I'd like to say a private word to him," responded Pike.

"Then you'd better not wait to say it. I'll tell him of your wish. It's all safe. Why, Pike, if the police themselves came, they'd not trouble to touch you now."

"I shouldn't much care if they did," said the man. "I haven't cared for a long while; but there were the others, you know."

"Yes," said Mr. Hillary.

"Look here," said Pike; "no need to tell him particulars; leave *them* till I'm gone. I don't know that I'd like *him* to look me in the face, knowing them."

"As you will," said Mr. Hillary, after a pause of consideration, and falling in with the wish more readily than he might have done of any but a dying man.

He had patients out of Calne, beyond Hartledon, and took the opportunity to call in returning. It was a snowy day; and as the surgeon was winding towards the house, past the lodge, with a quick step, and his umbrella held slant-wise, he saw a white figure marching across the park. It was Lord Hartledon. He had been caught in the storm, and came up laughing.

"Umbrellas are scarce with your lordship," observed Mr. Hillary, with the freedom of intercourse long intimacy had sanctioned.

"It didn't snow when I came out," said the earl, shaking himself, and making light of the matter. "Were you coming to honour me with a morning call?"

"I was and I wasn't," returned the surgeon. "I've no time for morning calls, unless they are professional ones; but I wanted to say a word to you. Have you a mind for a further walk in the snow?"

"As far as you like."

"There's a patient of mine drawing very near the time when doctors can do no more for him. He has been expressing a wish to see you, and I undertook to convey the request."

"I'll go of course," said Val, all his kindly readiness on the alert. "Who is it?"

"It's one of the black sheep," answered the surgeon. "I don't know whether that will make any difference?"

"It ought not to," said Val rather warmly. "Black sheep have more need of help than white ones, when it comes to the last. I suppose it's a poacher wanting to clear his conscience by confessing to a wholesale slaughter of game."

"It's Pike," said Mr. Hillary.

"Pike! What can he want with me? Is he no better?"

"He'll never be better in this world; and to speak the truth, I think it's time he left it. He'll be happier, poor fellow, let's hope, in another than he has been in this. Has it ever struck you, Lord Hartledon, that there was something strange about Pike, and his manner of coming there?"

"Very strange indeed."

"Well, Pike is not Pike, but another man—which I suppose your lordship will call Irish. But that he is so ill, and it would not be worth while of the law to take him, he might be in mortal fear of your seeing him, lest you should betray him. He wanted you not

to be informed until the last hour. I told him there was no fear."

"I would not betray him — I would not betray any living man, whatever his crime, for the whole world," returned Lord Hartledon; his voice so earnest as to amount to pain. And the surgeon looked at him; but there rose up in his remembrance how *he* had been avoiding betrayal for years. "Who is he?"

"Willy Gum."

The earl turned his head sharply under cover of the surgeon's umbrella, for they were walking along together. A thought crossed him that the words might be a jest.

"Yes, Pike is Willy Gum," continued Mr. Hillary. "And there you have the explanation of the poor mother's nervous terrors. I do pity her. The clerk has taken it more philosophically, and seemed only to care lest the fact should get known. Ah, poor thing! what a life hers has been! Her displayed fears of the wild neighbour, her basins for cats, are all explained now: she dreaded lest Calne should suspect that she occasionally stole in to the shed under cover of the dark night with the basins containing messes for its inmate. There the man has lived — if you can call such an existence living; Willy Gum, concealed by his borrowed black hair and whiskers; but that he was only a boy when he went away, Calne would have recognised him in spite of them."

"And he is not a poacher and a snarer, and I don't know what all, leading a lawless life, and thieving for his living?" exclaimed Lord Hartledon, the first question that rose to the surface, amidst the many that were struggling in his mind.

"I don't believe the man has touched the worth of a pin belonging to any body since he came, not even on your preserves. People took the notion up only from his wild appearance, and because he had no ostensible means of living. It would not have done to let them know he had his supplies — sometimes money, sometimes food — from the next door, respectable Clerk Gum's."

"But why should he be in concealment at all? That bank affair was made all right at the time."

"Well, there are other things he feared, it seems. I've not time to enter into details now; you'll know them later. There he is — Pike; and there he'll die — Pike always."

"How long have you known of it?"

"Since that fever he caught from the rectory some years ago," replied the surgeon. "I recollect your lordship telling me not to let him want for any thing;" and Lord Hartledon winced at the remembrance brought before him, as he always did wince now at the unhappy past. "I never shall forget it. I went in, thinking Pike was ill, and that he, wild and disreputable man though he had the character of being, might want physic as well as his neighbours. Instead of the black-haired bear I expected to see, there lay a young, light, delicate fellow, with a white brow, and cheeks pink with fever. The features seemed familiar to me; little by little recognition came, and I saw it was Willy Gum, whom every body had been mourning as dead. He said a word or two of pleading, that I would keep his secret, and not give him up to justice. I did not understand what there was to give him up for then. However, I promised. He was too ill to speak much;

and I went to the next door, and in the presence of that long-tongued Lydda Jones, put it to Gum's wife that she should go and nurse Pike on the score of humanity. Of course it was what she wanted to do. Poor thing! she fell on her knees to me later, beseeching me not to betray him."

"And you have kept counsel all this while?"

"Yes," said the surgeon laconically. "Would your lordship have done otherwise, even though it had been a question of hanging?"

"I!" said his lordship; "I wouldn't give a man a month at the treadmill if I could help it. One does get led into offences so easily," he dreamily added.

They crossed over the waste land, and Mr. Hilary opened the door of the shed with a pass-key. A lock had been put on when Pike was lying in rheumatic fever, lest intruders might go in unawares, and see him without his black hair.

"Here, Pike, I have brought my lord. He won't tell of you."

CHAPTER XV.

The Shed Razed.

SHUTTING the door upon them, the surgeon went off on other business, and Lord Hartledon entered and bent over the bed; a more comfortable bed than it had used to be. It was the Willy Gum of other days; the boy he had played with when they were boys together; he the embryo nobleman, the other the clerk's son. White, wan, wasted, with the dying hectic on his cheek, the glitter already in his eye, he lay there; and Val's eyelashes shone as he took the worn hand.

"I am so sorry, Willy. I had no suspicion it was you. Why did you not confide in me?"

The invalid shook his head. "There might have been danger in it."

"Never from me," was the emphatic answer.

"Ah, my lord, you don't know. I haven't dared to make myself known to a soul. Mr. Hillary found it out, and I couldn't help myself."

Lord Hartledon glanced around at the strange place; the rafters above, the rude walls: a fire was burning on the hearth, and the appliances brought to bear were more comfortable than might have been imagined; but still —

"Surely you will allow yourself to be removed to a better place than this, Willy?" he said.

"Call me Pike," came the feverish interruption. "Never that other name again, my lord; I've done with

it for ever. As to a better place — I shall have that soon enough.”

“You wanted to say something to me, Mr. Hillary said.”

“I’ve wanted to say it some time now, and to beg your lordship’s pardon. It’s about the earl’s death.”

“My brother’s?”

“Yes. I was on the wrong scent a long while. And I can tell you what nobody else will.”

Lord Hartledon lifted his head quickly; thoughts were crowding impulsively into his mind, and he spoke in the moment’s haste.

“Surely you had not any thing to do with that!”

“No; but I thought your lordship had.”

“What do you mean?” asked the earl quietly.

“It’s for that; for my foolish and wicked and mistaken thought, that I would crave a pardon before I go. I thought your lordship had killed the earl, either accidentally or by malice.”

“You must be dreaming, Pike!”

“No; but I was no better than dreaming then. I had been living amid lawless scenes, over the seas and on the seas, where a life’s not of much account, and the fancy was easy enough. I happened to overhear a quarrel between you and the earl just before his death; I saw you going towards the spot at the time the accident happened, as your lordship may remember —”

“I did not go so far,” interrupted the earl, wondering still whether this might not be the wanderings of a dying man. “I turned back amidst the trees at once, and walked slowly home. I wish I had gone on!”

"Yes, yes; I was on the wrong scent. And there was that blow on his temple to keep up the farce, which I know now must have been done against the estrade. I did suspect at the time, and your lordship will perhaps not forgive me for it. I let drop a word that I suspected before that man Gorton, and he asked me what I meant; and I explained it away, and said I was chaffing him. And I have been all this while, up to a few weeks ago, learning the true particulars of how his lordship died."

The earl decided that the man's mind was undoubtedly wandering.

But Pike was not wandering. And he told the story of the boy Ripper having been locked up in the mill. Mr. Ripper was nearly a match for Mr. Pike himself in deceit; and Pike had only got at the real facts by dint of long patience and perseverance and many threats. Ripper was afraid to tell. The boy had seen the whole of the accident; had watched it from the window where he was enclosed, powerless to get out, unless he had torn away the grating. Lord Hartledon (the late lord) had lost all command of the little skiff, his arm being utterly disabled; and it came drifting down towards the mill, and struck against the estrade. The skiff righted itself at once, but not the earl: there was a slight struggle, a few cries, and he lay motionless, drifting later to the place where he was found. Mr. Ripper's opinion was that he lost his senses with the blow on the temple, and fell an easy prey to death. Had that gentleman only sacrificed the grating and his own reputation, he might have saved him easily; and that fact had been upon his conscience since, making him fear all sorts of things;

not the least of which was that he might be hung as a murderer. This story he had told to Pike at the time, with one reserve — he persisted that he had not *seen*, only heard. Pike saw by intuition that the boy was still not telling the whole truth, and he suspected he was screening Lord Hartledon — he who now stood before him. Mr. Ripper's private logic tended to the belief that he could not be punished if he stuck to the avowal of having seen nothing: he did say he saw his lordship and the skiff drifting down; he did say he heard cries; and when Pike asked if they were cries as if he were being assaulted, the boy evasively answered "happen they were." Another little item he suppressed: that he found the porte-monnaie at the bottom of the skiff, after he got out of the mill, and appropriated it to himself; and when he had fairly done that, he grew more afraid of having done it than of all the rest. The money he secreted, using it when he dared, a six-pence at a time; the case, with its papers, he buried in the place where his master afterwards found it. With all this upon the young man's conscience, no wonder he was a little confused and contradictory in his statements to Pike; no wonder he fancied the ghost of the man he could have saved and did not, might be on occasion hovering after him! Pike got at the real truth at last; and a compunction had come over him, now that he was dying, for having doubted Lord Hartledon.

"My lord, I can only ask you to forgive me. I ought to have known you better. But things seemed to corroborate it so: I've heard people say that the new lord was as a man who had some dreadful care upon him. O, I was a fool!"

"At any rate it was not *that* care, Pike. I would have saved my brother's life with my own, had I been at hand to do it. As to Ripper — I shall never bear to look upon him."

"He's gone away," said Pike.

"Where's he gone?"

"The miller turned him off for idleness, and he's gone away, nobody knows where, to get work: I don't suppose he'll ever come back again. This is the real truth of the matter as it occurred, my lord; and there's no more behind it. Ripper has now told all he knows, just as fully as if he had been put to the torture."

The earl stayed with Pike some time longer, soothing the man as much as it was in his power and his kindly nature to soothe. He whispered a word of the clergyman, Dr. Ashton.

"Father says he shall bring him to-night," was the answer. "It's all a farce."

"I am sorry to hear you say that," returned the earl gravely.

"If I'd never said a worse thing than that, my lord, I shouldn't hurt. Unless the accounts are made up beforehand, parsons can't avail much at the twelfth hour. Mother's lessons to me when I was a child, and her reading the Bible as she sits here in the night, are worth more than Dr. Ashton could do. But for those old lessons having come home to me now, I might not have cared to ask forgiveness of your lordship. Dr. Ashton! what's he? For an awful sinner — and it's what I've been — there's only Christ. At times I think I've been too bad even for him. I've only my sins to take to him: never were worse in this world."

The earl went out rather bewildered with the occurrences of the morning. Thinking it might be only kind to step in to the clerk's, he crossed the stile and went in by the open back-door without ceremony. Mrs. Gum was by herself in the kitchen, scraping carrots, and crying bitterly. She dried her eyes in confusion, and began saying something about "them onions," as she curtseyed to her visitor.

"I know it all," he interrupted, in a low and considerate tone, as he touched the poor suffering woman. "I have been to see him. Never mind explanations: let us think what we can best do for him to lighten these last hours."

Mrs. Gum burst into some distressing sobs. It was a relief, no doubt: but she wondered how much the earl knew.

"I say that he ought to be got away from that place, Mrs. Gum. It's not fit for a man to die in. You might have him here. Calne! What's Calne? Surely my protection will be sufficient to screen him against tattling Calne!"

She shook her head, saying it was of no use talking to Willy about removal; he wouldn't have it; and she thought herself it might be better not. Jabez, too; if this ever came out in Calne, it would just kill him; his lordship knew what he was, and how he had cared for appearances all his life. No; it would not be for many hours more now, and Willy must die in the shed where he had lived.

Lord Hartledon sat down on the ironing-board, the white table underneath the window, in the old familiar manner of former days; many and many a time had he perched himself there to talk to her when he was

young Val Elster. But it was the servant who used to scrape the carrots then.

"Only fancy what my life has been, my lord," she said. "People have called me nervous, timid; and Lydda Jones she raves at me for a fool whenever she comes; but look at the cause I've had! I was just beginning to get over the grief for his death, when he came here; and to the last hour of my life I sha'n't get the night out of my mind! I and Jabez were together in this very kitchen; I had come in here to wash up the tea-things — for the servant had asked leave to go out; and Jabez followed me. It was a cold, dark evening, and the parlour fire had got low and this was bright. By token, my lord, we were talking of you; you had just gone away to be an ambassador, or something; and then we spoke of the wild, strange, black man who had crept into the shed; and Jabez, I remember, said he should acquaint Mr. Marris if the fellow did not take himself off. I had seen him that very evening, at dusk, for the first time when his great black face rose itself up against mine, nearly frightening me to death; for I thought it was a bear. Jabez was angry at such a man's being there, and said he should go up to Hartledon in the morning and see the steward. Just then there came a tap at the kitchen-door, and Jabez went to it. It was the man; he had watched the servant out, and knew we were alone; and he came into the kitchen, and asked if we did not know him. Jabez did; he had seen Willy later than I had, and he recognised him; and then the man took off the black hair and great black whiskers, and I saw it was Willy, and nearly fainted dead away."

There was a pause. Lord Hartledon did not speak, and she resumed, after a little indulgence of grief.

"And since then all our aim has been to hide the truth, to screen him, and keep up the tale that we were afraid of the wild man. How it has been done I know not: but I do know that it has nearly killed me. What a night it was! When Jabez heard his story and forced him to answer all questions, I thought he would have given Willy up to the law there and then. My lord, we have just lived since with a sword over our heads!"

Lord Hartledon remembered the sword that had been over *his* head, and sympathised in every crevice of his heart.

"Tell me all," he said; "you are quite safe with me, Mrs. Gum."

"I don't know that there's much more to tell," she sighed. "We took the best precautions we could, in a quiet way, against discovery — having the holes in the shutters filled up, and new locks put on the doors, lest people might look in or step in, while he sat here of a night, which he took to do; Jabez, he didn't like it, but I'm afraid I encouraged it. It was so lonely for him, that shed, and so unhealthy! We sent away the regular servant, and engaged one by day, so as to have the house to ourselves at night. If a knock came to the door, Willy would slip out to the wood-house before we opened it, lest it might be any body coming in. He did not come in every night — two or three times a-week; and it never was pleasant; for Jabez he'd hardly open his mouth, unless it was to reproach him. Heaven alone knows what I've had to bear!"

"But, Mrs. Gum, I cannot understand. Why could not Willy have shown himself openly?"

It was evidently a most painful question. Her eyes fell; the crimson of shame came into her cheeks; and he felt sorry to have put it.

"Spare me, my lord, for I *cannot* tell you. Perhaps Jabez will: or Mr. Hillary; he knows it. It doesn't much matter, now death's so near; but I think it would kill me to have to tell it."

"And no one except the doctor has ever known that it was Willy?"

"One more, my lord: Mirrable. We told her of it at once. I have had to hear all sorts of cruel things said of him," continued Mrs. Gum. "That he thieved and poached, and did I know not what; and we could only encourage the fancy, for it put people off the truth of how he really had a living. 'Give a dog a bad name, you may hang him!'"

"Ay. Amidst other things, they said, I believe, that he was out with the poachers the night my brother George was shot!"

"And that night, my lord, he sat over this kitchen fire, and never was away from it. He was ill: it was the rheumatism, caught in Australia, that took such a hold upon him; and I had him here by the fire till near daylight in the morning, so as to keep him out of the damp shed. What with the fears of one thing and another, I grew into a state of perpetual terror; always shaking and twittering."

"Then you will not have him in here now," said Lord Hartledon, rising.

"I cannot," she sobbed.

"Well, Mrs. Gum, I came in just to say a word

of true sympathy. You have it heartily, and my services also, if necessary. Tell Jabez so."

He quitted the house by the front-door, as if he had been honouring the clerk's wife with a morning-call, should any curious body happen to be passing, and went across through the snow to the surgeon's. Mr. Hillary, an old bachelor, was at his early dinner, and Lord Hartledon sat down and talked to him.

"It's only rump steak; but it's very good. Won't your lordship take a mouthful by way of luncheon?"

"My curiosity is too strong just now to eat," said Val. "I have come over to know the rights and the wrongs of this story. What has Willy Gum been doing in the past years that it can't be told?"

"I am not sure that it would be safe to say while he's living."

"Not safe! With me!" retorted the earl. "Was it safe with you?"

"But I'm not a peer of the realm. I don't consider myself obliged, as a legislator, to give up to justice any poor criminal that comes in my way," said the surgeon, with his mouth full; and Val felt a little vexed, although he saw that he was joking.

"Come, Hillary!"

"Well, then, Willy Gum was coming home in the ship, you know, Morning Star; and a mutiny broke out — mutiny and murder, and every thing else that's bad; and one George Gordon was the ring-leader."

"Yes. Well?"

"Willy Gum was George Gordon."

"What!" exclaimed Lord Hartledon, not understanding how to take the words. "How could he be George Gordon?"

"Because the real George Gordon never sailed at all in the ship; and this fellow Gum went on board in his name, calling himself Gordon."

Lord Hartledon leaned back in his chair and listened to the explanation. A very simple one, after all. Gum, one of the wildest and most careless characters possible when in Australia, gambled away, before sailing, the money he had acquired. Accident led him acquainted with George Gordon, also going home in the same ship, and with money. Gordon got killed the night before sailing — (Mr. Carr had well described it, a drunken brawl) — killed accidentally. Gum was at it; he saw his opportunity, went on board as Gordon, and claimed the luggage — some of it gold — already on board. How the mutiny broke out was less clear; but one of the other passengers knew Gum, and threatened to expose him; and perhaps this led to it. Gum, at any rate, was the ringleader, and this passenger was one of the first killed. Gum — Gordon as he was called — contrived to escape in the open boat, and found his way to land; thence, disguised, to England and to Calne; and at Calne he had lived since, with the price offered for George Gordon on his head.

It was a strange and awful story: and the Earl of Hartledon felt a shiver run through him as he listened to it. In truth, that shed was the safest and fittest place for him to die in!

As die he did ere the third day was over. And

was buried as Pike, that wild man, without a mourner. Clerk Gum stood over the grave in his official capacity; and Dr. Ashton, who had visited the sick man, himself read the service, which caused some wonder in Calne.

And the following week the Earl of Hartledon caused the shed to be cleared away, and the waste land to be ploughed; saying he'd have no more tramps lodging themselves next door to Mr. and Mrs. Gum.

CHAPTER XVI.

Fears for the Dowager.

AGAIN the years went on, bringing not altogether comfort to the house of Hartledon. As Anne's children were born — and there were three now — a sort of jealous rivalry, more incipient than active, seemed to arise between them and the two elder children; and this in spite of Anne's best efforts. The real moving spring in the feeling was the Countess Dowager. She it was who excited in secret the passions of the elder against their little brothers and sisters; but so craftily, so cautiously was her work done, that Anne could never get hold of any thing tangible to remonstrate against. Things would grow tolerably smooth during the old woman's absences; but she took very good care not to make those absences long ones; and then all the ill-nature and the rebellion reigned triumphant.

Once only Anne spoke of this, and that was to her father. She hinted at the state of things, and asked his advice. Why did not Val interpose his authority, and forbid the Dowager the house, if she could not keep herself from making mischief in it, sensibly asked the rector. But Anne said neither she nor Val liked to do this. And then the rector fancied there was some constraint in his daughter's voice; that she was not telling him the whole case unreservedly. He inquired no farther, only gave her the best advice he

knew how to give: to be watchful herself, and counteract the Dowager's influence, so far as she could; and trust to time; doing her own duty lovingly by the children, under God.

What Anne had not spoken of to Dr. Ashton was the conduct of her husband in the matter. She could not, in that one respect, read him better than of old. Fond of herself as he was, as she knew him to be, in the petty disputes and jars of the children he invariably took the part of his first wife's — to the glowing satisfaction of the Countess Dowager. No matter how glaringly wrong they might be, how full of tyranny and provocation towards the younger, Lord Hartledon screened the elder, and — to use the expression of the nurses — snubbed the younger. Kind and Christian though Lady Hartledon was, she felt it acutely; and, to say the truth, she could not comprehend her husband.

The eldest, Lord Elster, was an ailing child; and Mr. Brook, the apothecary, was scarcely ever off attendance when they were in London. Lady Hartledon thought the boy's health might have been better left more to nature, but she would not have said so for the world. The Dowager, on the contrary, would have preferred that half the metropolitan faculty should see him daily. She had a sort of jealous dread lest any thing should happen to the boy, and Anne's son become the heir.

Lord Hartledon was a busy man now, and had a seat in the Cabinet — a sort of outside seat, not one of the ministers. Whatever his secret care might have been — and it was now a sort of passive care more

than an active, as if the awful dread had passed — he was a public favourite, and courted in society. He was young still; the face was as genial, the manners were as free, the dark-blue eyes not a whit less kindly than of yore; attractive as he was in earlier days, so he was still; and his love for his wife amounted yet to a passion.

At the close of a sharp winter, when they had come up to town from Hartledon in January, that the earl might be at his duties, and the Countess Dowager was inflicting upon them a longer stay than ordinary, it happened that Lord Elster — as was nothing unusual — seemed very poorly; and Mr. Brook was called in, and said he'd send a powder. He was called in so often to the boy as to take it quite as a matter of course; and, truth to say, thought no more of the present indisposition than that it might be a slight cold.

Late in the evening the two boys happened to be alone in the nursery, the nurse being temporarily absent from it. Lord Elster was now a tall, slender, handsome boy in knickerbockers; little Reginald a timid little fellow, several years younger — *rendered* timid by the perpetual tyranny exercised on him, and which he might not resent. The viscount was quiet enough this evening; he felt ill and shivering, and sat close to the fire in the warmth, behind the high wire fender. Casting his eyes upwards, he espied Mr. Brook's powder on the mantelpiece, with the stereotyped direction — "To be taken at bed-time." It was lying in close proximity to the jam-pot, which the head-nurse had put ready. Of course he had the greatest possible horror of medicine — children who

have been drenched with it invariably have — and his busy thoughts began to run upon how he might avoid that detestable powder. The little fellow was sitting on the carpet, playing with his box of bricks. Lord Elster turned his eyes on his brother, and a bright thought occurred to him.

“Regy,” said he, taking down the pot, “come here. Look at this jam: isn’t it nice? It’s raspberry and currant.”

Little Reginald left his bricks to bend over the tempting compound, and his mouth watered.

“I’ll give it you every bit to eat before nurse comes back,” continued the young lord, helping himself to a spoonful or two by way of augmenting the other’s longing, “if you’ll eat this first.”

Reginald Elster cast a look upon the powder his brother exhibited, which was of a somewhat yellowish cast. “What is it?” lisped he; “something good?”

“Delicious. It’s just come in from the sweet-stuff shop. It’s the sugar they use to candy their fruit with. Open your mouth — wide; that’s not wide enough; stretch it out.”

Reginald did as he was bid: he opened his mouth to its utmost width, and the viscount shot in the powder.

Now it happened to be a preparation of that drug familiarly known as “Dover’s powder,” particularly bitter and nauseous. The child found it so, and set up a succession of piercing shrieks, which arose the whole house. The nurse rushed in; and Lord and Lady Hartledon, both of whom were dressing for dinner, ran in. There stood Reginald, coughing, chok-

ing, spitting, and roaring; and there sat my lord, equably devouring the last of the jam. With time and difficulty the facts were elicited from the younger child, and the elder scorned to deny them.

"What a wicked, treacherous, greedy Turk you must be!" ejaculated the nurse, who was often in hot water with the viscount.

"But Reginald need not have screamed so," testily interposed Lord Hartledon. "I thought one of them must be on fire. You naughty child, why did you scream?" he continued, giving Reginald a tap on the ear.

"Any child would have screamed at being so taken by surprise," said Lady Hartledon. "It is Edward who is in fault, not Reginald; and it is he who deserves punishment."

"And he should have it, if he were my son," muttered the nurse under her breath, as she picked up the unhappy Reginald. "A great greedy boy, to swallow down every bit of the jam-pot, and never give his dear little brother a taste, after poisoning him with that nasty powder!"

The viscount rose, and cast a look of scorn on the nurse. "The powder's good enough for him: he is nothing but a young brat, and I am Lord Elster."

Lady Hartledon felt provoked. Perhaps the reader would have been so in her place. "What is that you say, Edward?" she asked, laying her hand upon his shoulder in reproof.

"Let me alone, mamma. He'll never be any thing but Regy Elster, and powder is proper for him, and his grandpapa's an old parson," added the boy to the

nurse, defiantly. "*I shall be Earl of Hartledon, and jam's proper for me, and it's all fair that I should put upon him.*"

The nurse flounced off with Reginald, and Lady Hartledon turned to her husband. "Is this to be suffered? Will you allow it to pass without correction?"

"He means nothing," said the earl. "Do you, Edward, my boy?"

"O yes, papa, I mean what I say. I shall stand up for myself and Maude."

The earl made no remonstrance: he only drew the boy to him, with a hasty gesture, as if he would have shielded him from anger and the world.

Lady Hartledon, hurt almost to tears, quitted the room. But she had scarcely reached her own when she remembered that she had left a diamond brooch in the nursery, which she had been about to put into her dress when alarmed by the cries of Reginald. She went back for it, and stood almost confounded by what she saw. Lord Hartledon, sitting down, had clasped his son in his arms, and was sobbing over him; loud, bitter sobs, such as man rarely gives vent to.

"Papa, Regy and the other two are not going to put me and Maude out of our places, are they? We are your own children, are we not?"

"Yes, yes, my boy; no one shall put you out," was the answer, as he pressed passionate kisses on the boy's face. "I will stand by you for ever."

Very judicious indeed! the once sensible earl seemed to ignore the evident fact that the boy had been tutored; that evil influence must be at work. Lady Hartledon, an awe creeping over her, she knew

not of what, left her brooch where it was, and stole back to her dressing-room.

Presently the earl came in, all traces of emotion removed from his features, on which a smile sat. Lady Hartledon had dismissed her maid, and stood leaning against the arm of the sofa, indulging in bitter rumination.

"Silly children!" cried he gaily; "there's something to do with them. And Edward has lost his pow—"

He broke off; stopped by the look of angry reproach from his wife, cast on him for the first time in their married life. He took her hand and bent down to her; tender love, if ever she read it, in his eyes and tone.

"Forgive me, Anne; you are feeling this."

"Why do you throw these slights on my children? Why are you not more just?"

"I do not intend to slight our children, Anne, heaven knows. But I — I cannot punish Edward."

"Why did you ever make me your wife?" sighed Lady Hartledon, drawing her hand away.

His poor assumption of gay unconcern was leaving him quickly; his face was changing to one of bitter sorrow.

"When I married you," she resumed, "I had reason to hope that should children be born to us, you would love them equally with your first; I had a right to hope it. What have I done to you —"

"Stay, Anne! I can bear any thing better than reproach from you."

"What have I and my children done to you, I was about to ask, that you should take this aversion

to them? that you should lavish all your love on the others?"

The earl bent down, his voice low, agitation in his face and gestures.

"Hush, Anne! you don't know. The danger is that I should love your children better, far better than Maude's. It might be so if I did not guard against it."

"I cannot understand you," she exclaimed.

"Unfortunately I understand only too well myself. I have a heavy burden to bear; do not you — my best and dearest — do not you increase it."

She looked at him keenly; she laid her hands lovingly upon him, the tears gathering in her eyes. "Tell me what the burden is; O Val, tell it me! Let me share it."

But Val drew in again at once, scared at the request: and contradicted himself in the most absurd manner.

"There's nothing that you can share, Anne; nothing to tell. Don't take fancies."

Certainly this change was not propitiatory. Lady Hartledon, chilled and mortified, disdained to pursue the theme. Drawing herself up, she turned to go down to dinner, remarking that he might treat the children with more *apparent* justice.

"I am just; at least, I wish to be just," he broke forth in an impassioned tone. "But I cannot be severe with Edward and Maude."

Another powder was procured for Lord Elster, and, amidst much fighting and resistance, was got down his throat. Lady Hartledon was in his room the first thing in the morning. One grand quality in

her was, that she never visited her vexation on the children; and Edward, in spite of his unamiable behaviour, did at heart love her, while he despised his grandmother; one of his sources of amusement being to take off that estimable old lady's peculiarities behind her back, and send the servants into convulsions.

"You look very hot, Edward," exclaimed Lady Hartledon as she kissed him. "How do you feel?"

"My throat's sore, mamma, and my legs could not find a cold sheet all night. Feel my hand."

It was a child's answer, sufficiently expressive. An anxious look rose to her countenance.

"Are you sure your throat is sore?"

"It's very sore. I am so thirsty."

Lady Hartledon gave him some tea, and sent word to Mr. Brook to come round as soon as possible. At breakfast she met the Dowager, who had been out the previous evening during the episode of the jam. Lady Hartledon mentioned to her husband that she had sent a message to the doctor, not much liking Edward's symptoms.

"What's the matter with him?" asked the Dowager quickly. "What are his symptoms?"

"Nay, I may be wrong," said Lady Hartledon with a smile. "I won't infect you with my fears, when there may be no reason for them."

The Countess Dowager caught at the word "infect," and applied it in a manner never thought of by the speaker. She was the same foolish old woman that she had ever been; indeed, her dread of catching any disorder had only grown more intense with years. And it happened, unfortunately for her peace, that the disorder which leaves its cruel traces on the most

beautiful face was just then prevalent in London. Of all maladies to which the human frame is subject, the vain old creature had always most dreaded that. She rose up from her seat; her face turned pale in spite of the pearl-powder on her nose and the carmine on her cheeks, and her teeth began to chatter.

"It's small-pox! If I have a horror of one calamity more than another, it's that dreadful, disfiguring small-pox. I'd not stop in a house where it was for a hundred thousand pounds. I might catch it and be marked!"

She commenced her war-dance. Lady Hartledon begged her to be composed, and the earl smothered a laugh. The symptoms, as Anne believed, were not those of small-pox.

"How should you know?" retorted the Dowager, cutting short the assuring words. "How should any body know? Get Pepps here directly."

"You had better compose yourself, ma'am, and eat your breakfast," said Val. "Old people like you" — he had nearly committed himself, and went on with a cough — "and me, do not ordinarily take disorders from children."

"I can't be composed; I can't eat: who could, with this horror upon them? Is it Pepps that's sent for?"

"No; it is Mr. Brook," said Anne. "I have more confidence in him where children are concerned."

"Confidence in that Brook!" shrieked the Dowager, pushing up her flaxen front. "A common, over-worked apothecary! Never M. D.'d, never even knighted, never been to court, never anything! Confidence in him, Lady Hartledon! Elster's life may be in danger, and

he is my grandchild, and I insist on Pepps being fetched to him."

Anne sat down at once and wrote a brief note for Sir Alexander; while the Countess Dowager tore away at the bell, that it might be despatched forthwith. It happened that the message sent for Mr. Brook had found that gentleman away from home, and the baronet arrived first. Just the same bland and pompous little man who had attended the late Countess of Hartledon, the same snow-white hair, and the same ebony cane with its gold head, which he was never seen without — there was a joke in the medical profession that he took it to bed with him. He looked at the child, asked a few bland questions of Lady Hartledon, and a few crabbed ones of the nurse, and wrote a prescription. He did not say what the illness might be: he was a man who never hazarded a premature opinion. As he was leaving the chamber, a servant accosted him.

"Lady Kirton wishes to see you, sir."

The Countess Dowager had been arming herself against infection: she had disposed of a pound of camphor amongst her gauzes, and she held a handkerchief, saturated with spirits of camphor, before her nose and mouth.

"Well, Pepps," cried she, dodging from him as he advanced, so as to keep a safe distance between them, "what is it?"

"I do not take upon myself to pronounce an opinion, Lady Kirton," rejoined the doctor, who had grown to feel irritated lately at the Dowager's want of ceremony towards him. "In the early stage of a disorder it can rarely be done with certainty."

"Now don't let us have any of that professional humbug, Pepps," rejoined her ladyship, speaking through the fumes of camphor. "You doctors know a common disorder as soon as you see it, only you think it looks wise not to say. Is it small-pox?"

"It's not impossible," said the doctor in his wrath.

The Dowager gasped, and held the handkerchief closer.

"But I do not observe any symptoms of that malady developing themselves at present," added the doctor. "I think I may say it is not small-pox."

"Good patience, Pepps! you'll frighten me into it. It is and it isn't — what do you mean? What is it, if it's not that?"

"I may be able to tell after a second visit. Good morning, Lady Kirton," said he, backing out. "Take care you don't do yourself an injury with too much camphor. It is exciting."

In a short period Mr. Brook arrived. When he had seen the child and was alone with Lady Hartledon, she explained that the Countess Dowager had wished Sir Alexander Pepps called in, and showed him the prescription just written. He read it and laid it down.

"Lady Hartledon," said he, "I must venture to disagree with that prescription. Lord Elster's symptoms are those of scarlet fever, and it would be unwise to administer it. Sir Alexander stands of course much higher than I do in the profession, but my practice with children is larger than his."

"I feared it was scarlet fever," answered Lady Hartledon. "What is to be done? I have every confidence in you, Mr. Brook; and were Lord Elster my

own child, I should know how to act. Do you think it would be dangerous to give him this prescription? You may speak to me confidentially."

"Not dangerous," said the surgeon; "it is a prescription that will do no harm and no good. I suspect Sir Alexander could not detect the nature of the illness, and wrote this merely to gain time. It is not an infrequent custom so to do. In my opinion, not an hour should be lost in giving him a far more efficacious medicine: early treatment is every thing in scarlet fever."

Lady Hartledon had been rapidly making up her mind. "Send in what you think right to be taken, immediately," she said, "and meet Sir Alexander in consultation later."

When Mr. Brook left the chamber, a servant was on the watch for him, and conducted him to the Dowager in the dining-room, whose handkerchief had just received a fresh saturation.

"Now, Brook," cried she sharply, "speak up. What is it?"

"Madam," was his reply, "I think it will turn out to be scarlet fever."

The Dowager shrieked and backed against the wall. "I have never had it, I have never had it! O, mercy! that's a thing that kills people. What on earth possessed you to find out that it was that?" she added irascibly, turning her consternation on Mr. Brook.

"I am sorry to have had no other alternative, your ladyship," cried Mr. Brook.

"What should bring scarlet fever into this house? It's not in London, is it?"

"It is certainly not prevalent. But there's no accounting for these things. I —"

"For goodness' sake, man, go away! Don't stop preaching here, to infect me. Scarlet fever!"

Scarlet fever it proved to be; not a mild form of it; and in a very few hours Lord Elster was in imminent danger, the throat being chiefly affected. The house was in commotion; the Dowager worse than any body in it. A complication of fears beset her: first was her own terror of taking the disorder, and next was the little less abject dread that death might remove *her* grandchild, and so exalt little Reginald into Viscount Elster and future Earl of Hartledon. In this latter fear she partly lost her fears for herself, forgetting precaution sufficiently to remain in the house; for it seemed to her that the child would inevitably die if she quitted it. Late in the afternoon she rushed into the presence of the doctors, who had just been holding a second consultation, her head enveloped in a sort of hood, and the fumes of camphor scenting the staircase.

Sir Alexander Pepps recommended leeches to the throat: Mr. Brook disapproved of them. "It is the one chance now for his life," said Sir Alexander.

"It is removing nearly all chance for it," said Mr. Brook.

Sir Alexander's opinion prevailed; it was of course becoming that a baronet's should; and when they came forth it was understood that the leeches were to be applied. But here Lady Hartledon stepped in.

"I dread leeches to the throat, Sir Alexander, if you will pardon me for saying so. I have twice seen them applied in scarlet fever; and the patients — one a young lady, the other a child — in both cases died."

"My lady, I have given my opinion," curtly returned the physician. "They are necessary in Lord Elster's case."

"Do you approve of the leeches?" cried Lady Hartledon, turning to Mr. Brook.

"Not altogether," was the cautious answer.

"Answer me one question, Mr. Brook," said Lady Hartledon in her earnestness; but the mention of leeches had terrified her. "Would you apply these leeches were you treating the case alone?"

"No, madam, I would not."

Anne appealed to her husband. When the medical men differed she thought the decision lay with him.

"I'm sure I don't know," returned Val, who knew nothing whatever about medical treatment, and felt himself perfectly helpless to advise. "Can't you decide, Anne? you know more about children and illness than I do."

"I would do so without the hesitation of a moment, were it my own child," she replied. "I would not allow them to be put on."

"No, you would rather see him die," interrupted the Dowager, who overheard the words, and most intemperately and unjustifiably answered them: "you have not forgotten that your son would then be Viscount Elster."

Anne coloured with shame for the old woman, but the words silenced her: how was it possible for her to press her own opinion after that? Sir Alexander had it all his own way, and the leeches were applied on either side the throat, Mr. Brook emphatically asserting in Lady Hartledon's private ear that he 'washed his hands' of the measure. Before they came off, the con-

sequences were apparent: the throat was swollen outwards, on both sides, as large as an egg; within, it appeared to be closing.

The Dowager, rather beside herself on the whole, had been all for the leeches. Any one, seeing her conduct now, might have thought the invalid boy was really dear to her. Nothing of the sort. A hazy idea had been looming through her mind for years that Val was not strong: she had been mistaking mental illness for bodily illness; and a project to have full control of her grandchild, should he come into the succession prematurely, coloured her dreams. This charming prospect would be cut ignominiously short, if the boy went first.

Sir Alexander saw his error. There must be something peculiar in Lord Elster's constitution, he blandly said; it would not have happened in another. Of course; any thing that turns out wrong always is in the constitution; never in the treatment. Whether he died or lived now, was just the turn of a straw: the chances were that he'd die. All that could be done now was to endeavour to counteract the mischief by external applications.

"I wish you would let me try a remedy," said Lady Hartledon, wistfully. "A compress of cold water round the throat, with oil-silk over it. I have seen it do so much good in cases of inward inflammation."

Mr. Brook smiled: if any thing would do good, that might, he said, speaking as if he had not much faith in remedies now. Sir Alexander intimated that her ladyship might try it; graciously observing that it would do no harm.

The application was used, and the evening went on. The child had fallen into a sort of stupor, and Mr. Brook came in again before he had been away an hour, and leaned anxiously over the patient. He lay with his eyes half-closed, and breathed with difficulty.

"I do think," he exclaimed, softly, "that there's the slightest shade of improvement."

"In the fever itself, or in the throat?" whispered Lady Hartledon, who had not quitted the boy's bedside.

"O, in the throat. If so, it is due to your remedy, Lady Hartledon."

"Is he in danger?"

"In very great danger. But still I think I see a gleam of hope."

After the surgeon's departure, she went down to her husband, meeting Hedges on the stairs, who was coming to inquire after the patient for his master, for about the fiftieth time. The earl was in the library, pacing about incessantly in the semi-darkness, for the room was only lighted by the fire. Anne closed the door and approached him.

"Percival, I do not bring you very good tidings," she said; "and yet they might be worse. Mr. Brook tells me he is in great danger; but he does think he sees a gleam of hope."

The earl took her hand within his arm and drew her along with him in his striding; his eyes were fixed on the carpet, and he said nothing.

"Don't grieve as those who are without hope," she continued, her eyes filling with tears. "Indeed, he may recover yet. I have been praying that it may be so."

"Don't pray for it," cried the earl, his tone one of painful entreaty. "I have been daring to pray that it might please God to take him."

"Percival!" she exclaimed, starting away from him.

"I am not mad, Anne. Death would be a more merciful fate for my boy than life. Death now, while he is innocent, safe in Christ's love! — death, in Heaven's mercy!"

And Anne crept back to the upper chamber, sick with terror; for she did think that the trouble of his child's state was affecting her husband's brain.

CHAPTER XVII.

Threading Beads.

THE Earl and Countess of Hartledon were entertaining company. A family group, however. No strangers. The everlasting Dowager stuck to them unpleasantly; making various things almost unbearable, and wearing out her welcome in no trifling degree, if she had but been wise enough to see it. She had escaped the scarlet fever, and the other ills dreaded for herself; had come out of the ordeal unscathed and untouched, and was alive still. For the matter of that, the young Viscount Elster had come out of it also: *not* unscathed; for the boy remained a poor sickly wreck, and there was very little hope that he would really recover. The final close might be delayed, but it was not to be averted. Before Easter they had left London for Hartledon, that he might have country air. The earl's eldest sister, Lady Margaret Cooper, came there with her husband; and on this day the other sister, Lady Laura Level, had arrived from India. Lady Margaret was an invalid, and not agreeable besides; but to Lady Laura and Anne the meeting, after so many years' separation, was one of exquisite pleasure. They had been close friends from childhood.

They were all gathered together in the large drawing-room after luncheon. The day was a pouring wet one,

and nobody had ventured out except Sir James Cooper: accustomed to the famed Scotch mists, this rain seemed like a genial shower, and Sir James was taking his recreation in it accordingly. It was a warm close day, for all the rain; and the large fire in the grate made the room oppressive, so that they were glad to throw the windows open.

Lying on a sofa near the fire was the boy, Lord Elster. Only to look at him, you might tell that he would never rally; though he fluctuated much; sometimes seeming better, sometimes worse. To-day he was, comparatively speaking, well. His sister, Lady Maude, was sitting threading beads; and the two others, much younger, stood looking on — Reginald and little Lady Anne. Lady Margaret Cooper, having a fellow-feeling for an invalid, sat close to the sick boy. Lord Hartledon sat apart at a table reading, and making notes occasionally with the pen and ink before him. The Dowager, more cumbersome, shorter, rounder than ever, and as fine as gauzes, and paint, and flaxen false curls could make her, dozed on the other side of the hearth. She was getting into the habit of taking a nap after luncheon as well as after dinner. Lady Laura Level was in danger of convulsions every time she looked at the Dowager. Never in all her life had she seen so queer an old figure. She and Anne stood together at an open window; the one eagerly asking questions of home, the other answering, all in an under-tone. Lady Laura had been away from her own home and kindred some twelve years, and it seemed to her like a lifetime.

“Anne, how *was* it?” she exclaimed. “It was a thing that always puzzled me, and I never made sense

of it. My husband said at the time I used to talk of it in my sleep."

"How was what?"

"About you and Val. You were as surely engaged to each other as you could be; ay, and you loved him too, and he loved you. How came that other marriage about? — that old guy's daughter to step in?"

"Well, I can hardly tell you. I was at Cannes with my dear mamma, and he fell into the entanglement. We knew nothing about it until they were married. Never mind all that now; I don't care to recall it, and it is a very sore point with Val. The blame, I believe, chiefly lay with *her*."

Anne glanced at the Dowager to indicate whom she meant. Lady Laura's eyes took the same direction, and she burst into a laugh.

"A painted, pinked-out old thing! She looks like one who would do it. Why doesn't somebody tell her to go and put herself under a glass-case at the British Museum? she'd be the greatest curiosity there. When news of the marriage came out to India, I was thunder-struck. I wrote off at once to Val, asking all sorts of questions, and got quite a savage letter back again, telling me to mind my own business. That letter alone would have told me how Val repented; it was so unlike him. Do you know what I did?"

"What did you do?"

"Sent him another letter by return mail with only two words in it — 'Elster's Folly.' Poor Val! She died of heart-disease, did she not?"

"Yes. But she seemed to have been ailing for some time before. She was greatly changed."

"Val is changed, if you like. There are threads of silver in his hair now; and he is so much quieter than I thought he ever would be. I wonder you took him, Anne, after all; and I wonder more still that Dr. Ashton allowed it."

A blush tinged Lady Hartledon's face, as she looked out at the soft rain, and a half smile parted her lips.

"I see, Anne. Love once, love always; and I suppose it was the same with Val, in spite of his folly. I should have taken out my revenge by marrying the first eligible man that offered to me. Talking of that — is poor Mr. Graves married yet?"

"Yes, at last," said Anne, laughing. "A very grand match too for him, poor timid man: his wife's a lord's daughter, and as tall as a house."

"If ever man worshipped woman, he worshipped you, though you were but a girl."

"Nonsense, Laura."

"Nonsense to you, my lady. You knew it quite well; and so did Val. Did he ever screw his courage up to proposing point?"

Anne laughed. "If he ever did, I was too vexed to answer him. He'll be very happy, Laura: his wife is a meek, loving woman, in spite of her formidable height."

"And now I want you to tell me one thing — How was it that Edward could not be saved?"

For the moment Lady Hartledon did not understand, and turned her eyes on the boy Edward.

"I mean my brother, Anne. When the news came

out to India that he had died a sudden death, in that shocking manner, following upon poor George — I don't care now to recall how I felt. Was there *no* one at hand to save him?"

"No one. A sad fatality seemed to attend it altogether. Val regrets his brother bitterly to this day. I once heard a thoughtless, unkind woman remark, it was a lucky accident for Val Elster: could she have known how joyfully Val would have welcomed his poverty again to have his brother back in life, she might have been more charitable."

"And that poor Willy Gum was killed at sea, after all!"

"Ay," said Anne, shortly. "When you spoke of Edward," she added, returning to the other subject, "I thought you meant the boy."

Lady Laura shook her head. "He will never get well, Anne," she whispered. "Death seems to be written in his face."

"You would say so if you saw him some days. He is of a very excitable disposition, and your coming has roused him to what seems like health. I never saw any one fluctuate so; one day dying, the next well. For myself I have very little hope of him, and Mr. Hillary has none; but I dare not say so to Margaret and the Dowager."

— "Why not?"

"It makes them so angry. They cannot bear to hear that there's a possibility of his death. Margaret may see danger, but I don't believe the Dowager does."

"Their wishes must blind them to the truth, then," observed Lady Laura. "The Dowager seems all fire and folly: but for her size, she'd put me in mind of Columbine in the ballets. She scarcely gave herself time to wish me welcome this morning, or to inquire how I might be after my long voyage; but began descanting on a host of evils, the chief one being that her grandson should have had fever."

"She would like him to bear a charmed life. Not from love of him, Laura."

"Not from love of him! What then?"

"I do not believe she has a particle of love for him. Don't think me uncharitable, Laura; it is the truth; Val will tell you the same. She is not capable of experiencing common affection for any one; every feeling of her nature is merged in one: self-interest. Had her daughter left another boy she would not be dismayed at the prospect of this one's death: whether he lived or whether he died, it would be all one to her. The grievance is, that Reginald should have the chance of becoming Lord Elster."

"Because he is your son. I understand. A vain, puffed old thing! the idea of her still painting her face and wearing her false curls! I wonder you tolerate her in your house, Anne! she's always here."

"How can I help myself? She considers, I do believe, that she has as much right in this house as I have."

"O, indeed! Does she make things uncomfortable?"

"More uncomfortable than I have ever confessed, even to my husband. From the very hour of my marriage, she set the two children against me, and against

my children when they came; and she never ceases to do so still. There would never have been the ill-feeling in Edward's and in Maude's heart towards the others, but for her."

"Why do you submit to it?"

"She is their grandmother, and I cannot well deny her the house. Perhaps I should have had the courage to attempt it, for the children's own sake, it is so shocking to train them to ill-nature, but that my husband appears to think as she does. The petty disputes between the children are frequent — for my two elder ones are getting of an age to turn again when trampled upon — but their father never corrects Edward and Maude, or allows them to be corrected; let them do what wrong they will, he takes their part. Laura, I believe that if Lord Elster killed one of my children, he would only caress him for it."

Lady Laura Level turned her eyes on the speaker's face, on its flush of pain and mortification.

"And Val loved you: and did *not* love Maude! How is this, Anne?"

"I cannot tell how it is," was the murmured answer. "Things altogether are getting worse than I can bear."

"Margaret has been with you some time; has she not interfered, or tried to put things upon the right footing?"

Anne shook her head. "She espouses the Dowager's side wholly; she upholds the two children in all their petty tyranny. No one in the house takes my part, or my children's."

"And what's Val about?"

"Don't misunderstand me, Laura: to *me* Val is ever affectionate and good. It is to the children that his behaviour is so strange. He appears to love my children, and, if the other two are not present, he is tender and kind to them; but in these disputes he takes notice of the elder ones alone, and is not commonly just to the younger."

"How very strange! Especially when we consider that he — did not particularly care for their mother. I suppose there's no treason in saying it!"

"Sometimes I fancy it must be that thought that makes him so: it is just as if he were ever striving to compensate them for some injury; at least such is the impression it makes on me. We all get on happily when we are alone, and the elder children are fond of me; but the moment the Countess Dowager comes, then the rivalry begins, and with it Percival's strange injustice."

"And Margaret has been helping in it! Just like her! Do you remember how you and I used to dread her for her proud domineering spirit when we were girls? I do, if you don't, Anne. It's time I came, I think, to set things to rights."

"Ah, Laura, neither you nor any one else can set things to rights. They have been at wrongs too long. The worst is, I cannot see what the evil is, as regards Val. If I ask him, he repels me, or laughs at me and tells me I am fanciful. That he has some secret grief upon him I have known long: his days are unhappy, his nights are restless; often when he thinks me asleep, I am listening to his sighs. I am glad

you have come home; I have wanted a true friend to confide these troubles to, and I could not speak of them except to one of the family."

"It reads like a romance in history!" cried Lady Laura. Some secret grief! Val *can't* be grieving after his wife!"

"No, that I am sure he is not. In one thing I can rest secure, Laura, that all his love is mine; and — though it seems wrong to say it — always has been."

"Is he grieving after the boy — fearing he may lose him?"

"Rather, as it seems to me, he fears he will recover," breathed Lady Hartledon.

"It *is* a romance, Anne. I'd make a book of it if I could."

"It is a mystery," said Anne.

They were interrupted by a commotion. Maude had been completing a splendid ring for herself; its beads all the colours of the rainbow, worked into diamonds. She was exhibiting it on her lifted finger for the benefit of admiring beholders.

"Papa, look at my ring. Aunt Margaret, look at my ring."

Lord Hartledon nodded pleasantly at the child from his distant seat; Lady Margaret appeared not to have heard; and Maude caught up a soft ball and threw it at her aunt. Unfortunately it took a wrong direction, went off at a right angle, and struck the nodding Dowager on the nose. She rose up in a semi-fury, and there ensued some commotion.

"Make me a ring, Maude," little Lady Anne was

heard to lisp when the Dowager had subsided into her chair again. Maude took no notice; her finger was still lifted with the precious ornament.

"Can you see it from your sofa, Edward?"

Viscount Elster rose from his recumbent posture and stretched himself. "Pretty well. You have put it on the wrong finger, Maude. Ladies don't wear rings on the little finger."

"But it won't go on the others," said Maude dolefully: "it's too small."

"Make a larger one."

"Make one for me, Maude," again broke in Anne's little eager voice.

"I daresay!" returned Maude. "You are big enough to thread beads for yourself."

"No, she's not," said Reginald, who could not speak much plainer than his sister. "Make her one, Maude."

"No, don't, Maude," called out Lord Elster. "Let them do things for themselves."

"Laura, you hear!" whispered Lady Hartledon.

"I do hear. And Val sits there and never reproves; and the blessed old Dowager's head and eyes are nodding and twinkling approval of the heir and his sister."

Lady Laura Level was an energetic little woman, thin and pale, and excessively active, with a propensity for setting the world to rights, and a very out-speaking tongue, as unceremoniously free as the Dowager's. In the cause of justice she would have stood up to fight a giant. Lady Hartledon was about

making some response, but she bade her hush; her attention was absorbed by the children. Perhaps the truth was that she was burning to have a say in the matter herself.

"Maude," she called out, "if that ring is too small for you, it would do for Anne nicely, and be only kind of you to give it. She'd prick her fingers, pretty little thing, if she tried to thread one for herself."

Maude looked dubious. Left to herself, the girl would have been pleasant and generous enough. She glanced at the Dowager.

"May I give it her, grand'ma?"

Grand'ma was conveniently deaf. She'd rather have cut the ring in two than it should be given to the hated little child: but, on the other hand, she did not care to run counter to the new comer, Laura Level, who was one to possess inconveniently independent opinions, and not to shrink from proclaiming them. Seizing the poker, she gave a thrust at the fire, shooting out a cloud of ashes, and thereby creating a diversion.

In the midst of it, and perhaps to get out of the smother, the viscount left his sofa and walked up to the young group and their beads. He was sadly weak, and he tottered unintentionally against Anne. The child happened to be standing on one leg like a partridge. The touch destroyed her equilibrium, and she went forward on Maude's lap. There was no damage, only that the box of beads was upset, and fell on the carpet. Maude screamed out at the loss of her precious treasures, rose up with vehement anger, and shook Anne. The child cried out.

"Why d'you hit her?" cried Reginald Elster. "It was Edward's fault; he pushed her first."

"What's that, you youngster!" exclaimed Lord Elster. "My fault! I'll teach you to say that. There: say it again," he added, striking Reginald a tingling slap on both cheeks.

Of course there was a loud noise and crying. The Dowager looked on with an inflamed face. Lady Margaret Cooper, who had no children of her own, stopped her ears. Lady Laura laid her hand on her sister-in-law's wrist.

"And you can witness these scenes, so unfit to be indulged in by refined children, and not check them! You *are* changed, Anne!"

"If I interfere to protect my children, I am checked," replied Lady Hartledon, from her quivering lips. "This scene is nothing to what we have sometimes."

"Who checks you — Val?"

"The Dowager. But he does not interpose for me. A moment, Laura: I cannot hope to make you thoroughly understand this: were I and the Dowager to come to an issue ourselves, my husband would rise up with all the indignation he possesses to protect me; I'm not sure but he would turn her from the house as one might turn a servant; but where the children are concerned, he tacitly lets her hold her sway. It is not often any thing of this sort takes place in his presence."

The noise continued: all the children seemed to be fighting together. Anne went forward and drew her own two out of the fray.

"Yes, pray send those two screamers to the nursery, Lady Hartledon," cried out the Dowager.

"I cannot think why they are allowed in the drawing-room at all," said Lady Margaret, addressing nobody in particular, unless it was the ceiling. "Edward and Maude would be quiet enough without them."

Anne did not retort: she only glanced at her husband, silent reproach on her pale face, and picked up the little Lady Anne in her arms to carry her from the room. But Lady Laura Level, impulsive and warm, came forward and stopped the exit.

"Lady Kirton, I am ashamed of you! Margaret, I am ashamed of you! I am ashamed of you all. You are doing the children a lasting injury, and you are guilty of cruel insult to Lady Hartledon. This is the second scene I have been a witness to, when the elder children were encouraged to behave ill to the younger; the first was in the nursery this morning; and I have been here yet but a few hours. And you, Lord Hartledon, their head and father, responsible for your children's welfare, can tamely sit by, and suffer it, and see your wife insulted! Is this what you married Anne Ashton for?"

The earl rose: a strange look of pain on his refined features. "You are mistaken, Laura. I wish every respect to be shown to my wife; respect from all. Anne knows it."

"Respect!" scornfully retorted Lady Laura. "When you do not give her a voice in her own house; when you allow her children to be trampled on, and beaten — *beaten, sir* — and she dare not interfere! Who are you, madam," turning again, in her anger, on the

Countess Dowager, "and who are you, Margaret, that you should dare to encourage Edward and Maude in rebellion against their present mother?"

Taken by surprise, the Dowager made no answer. Lady Margaret looked defiance.

"You and Anne have invited me to your house on a lengthened visit, Lord Hartledon," continued Laura; "but I promise you that if this is to continue, I will not stay in it; I will not witness insult to my early friend: and I will not see children incited to evil passions. Undress that child, sir," she sharply added, directing the earl's attention to Reginald, "and you will see a bruise on his shoulder. I saw it this morning, and asked the nurse what caused it, and was told Lord Elster kicked him."

"It was the little beggar's own fault," interposed Lord Elster, who was standing his ground with equanimity, and seemed to enjoy the scene rather than otherwise.

Lady Laura caught him sharply by the arm. "Of whom are you speaking? Who's a little beggar?"

"Regy is."

"Who taught you to call him one?"

"Grand'ma. It's what he is, you know."

"There, go away; go away, all of you," cried Lady Laura, turning the two elder ones from the room imperatively, after Anne and her children. "O, so you are going also, are you, Val! No wonder you are ashamed to stop here."

He was crossing the room; a curious expression on his drawn-in lips. Laura watched him from it; then went and stood before the Dowager, her back to her sister.

"Has it ever struck you, Lady Kirton, that you may one day have to account for this?"

"It strikes me that you are making a vast deal of unnecessary noise, Madam Laura!"

"If your daughter could look on, from her grave, at earth and its scenes — and some hold a theory that such a state of things is not impossible — what would be her anguish, think you, at the evil you are inculcating on her children? One of them will very soon be with her —."

The Dowager interrupted with a sort of yell.

"He will; there is no mistake in it. You who see him constantly may not detect it plainly; but it strikes with certainty upon a stranger. Were it not beneath me, I might ask on what grounds you tutor him to call Reginald a beggar, considering that your daughter brought my brother nothing but a few debts; while Miss Ashton brought him a large fortune?"

"I'd not condescend to be mean, Laura," put in Lady Margaret, while the Dowager gingerly wiped her face, which was getting rather hot.

They were interrupted by Hedges, showing in visitors. How much more Lady Laura might have said, must remain unknown: she was in a likely temper for it.

"Mr. and Mrs. Graves."

It was the curate; and the tall, meek woman spoken of by Anne. Laura laughed, as she shook hands with the former; whom she had known when a girl, and been given to ridicule more than was good for polite manners.

Lord Hartledon had left the room after his wife.

She sent the children to the nursery; and he found her alone in her chamber sobbing bitterly.

Certainly he was a contradiction. He took her in his arms fondly, beseeching her to pardon him, if he had unwittingly slighted her, as Laura implied; and his blue eyes were beaming forth affection, his voice was low with persuasive tenderness.

"There are times," she sobbed, "when I am tempted to wish myself back in my father's house!"

"I cannot think whence all this discomfort arises!" he exclaimed. "Of one thing, Anne, you may rest assured: as soon as Edward changes for the better or the worse — and one it must inevitably be — that miserable mischief-making old woman shall quit my house for ever."

"Edward will never change for the better," she said. "For the worse, he may soon: for the better, never."

"I know: Hillary has told me. Bear with things a little longer, Anne, and believe that I will remedy them the moment that remedy is possible. I, your husband, bid you trust me."

Lady Hartledon lifted her eyes to his. "We cannot go on as we are going on. Tell me what it is you have to bear. You remind me that you are my husband; I now remind you that I am your wife: confide in me. I will be true and loving to you, whatever it may be."

"Not yet; in a little time, perhaps. Bear with me still, my dear wife; bear with me."

His look was haggard; his voice had a ring of anguish; and he wrung her hand to pain as he left her. Whatever might be the grief upon him, Anne — as

she had not long before avowed to Lady Laura — could not doubt his love.

And as the earl went into the drawing-room, a smile on his face, gay words on his lips, chatting with the curate, laughing with his newly-married wife, both those gratified and unsuspecting visitors could have protested when they went forth, that there never was a man more free from care than that affable servant of her Majesty's, the Right Honourable the Earl of Harbledon.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Dipping into Val's Desk.

A CHANGE for the worse occurred in Lord Elster; and after two or three weeks' sinking he died, and was buried at Hartledon by the side of his mother. The earl's sisters quitted Hartledon House for a little change; but the Countess Dowager was in it still, and disturbed its silence with moans and little impromptu cries of lamentation, especially when going up and down the staircase and along the corridors.

Mr. Carr, who had come for the funeral, also remained. On the day subsequent to it, he and the earl were taking a quiet walk together, when they met Mrs. Gum. The earl stopped and spoke to her in his kindly manner. She was less nervous than she used to be; she and her husband were once more at peace in their house.

"I'd not like to presume to say a word of sympathy, my lord," she said, curtseying, "but we felt it indeed. Jabez was cut up like any thing when he came in yesterday from the funeral."

The earl looked at her, a meaning that she understood in his earnest eyes. "Yes, it is hard to part with our children: but, when grief is over, we live in the consolation that they have only preceded us to a better place, where sin and sorrow are not. We shall join them later in happiness."

She went off, tears of thankful joy filling her eyes. Another son was up there, safe from sin and sorrow, waiting for *her*; and she knew Lord Hartledon had thought of him in speaking, and meant her to do so.

"Carr," said the earl, "I never told you the finale of that tragedy. George Gordon, of the mutiny, did turn up: he lived and died in England."

"No!"

"Yes: and at Calne. It was that poor woman's son."

Mr. Carr looked round for an explanation. He knew *she* was the wife of Clerk Gum, and the sister of Hartledon's housekeeper. Lord Hartledon told him the whole, as the facts had come out to him.

"Pike always puzzled me," he said. "Disguised as he was with his black hair, and his face stained with some dark juice, and though I had not seen him since he was a lad, there was a look in him that used to strike some chord in my memory. It lay in the eyes, I think. You'll keep these facts sacred, Carr, for the parents' sake. They are known but to four of us, and we are all safe: Hilary, my wife's father, Anne, and myself."

"Good-day to your lordship!"

The salutation came from the tart voice of a tart woman, who went whisking past. It was Lydda Jones: she was in hot water, as usual, with the world, and was just now on her way to bang into the different public-houses in search of her husband. Lord Hartledon's private opinion was, that her tongue drove him into them.

"*She* was the greatest enemy of Pike in all the parish," remarked the earl; "little thinking that the man was a relative of her own."

"Have you told your wife yet?" questioned Mr. Carr, recurring to a different subject.

"No. I could not, somehow, while the child lay dead in the house. She shall know it shortly."

"And what about dismissing the Countess Dowager? You will do it?"

"Will! I shall be only too thankful to do it. All my courage has come back to me, thank Heaven!"

He spoke the words reverently, lifting his hat; not lightly, as a passing remark. The Countess Dowager of Kirton's reign was over; never would the earl allow her to disturb the peace of his house again. He might have to pension her off, but that was a light matter. His intention was to speak to her in a few days' time, allowing an interval to elapse after the boy's death; but she forestalled the time herself, as the earl was soon to find.

The dinner that evening was a sad one — sad and silent. The only one who did ample justice to it was the Countess Dowager — in a black gauze dress and white crape turban; and, let what would betide, Lady Kirton never failed to relish her dinner. She had a scheme in her head; it had been working there since the day of her grandson's death; and when the servants withdrew, she judged it expedient to disclose it to the earl, hoping to gain her point, now that he was softened with grief.

"Hartledon, I want to talk to you," she began, critically tasting the port wine; "and I must request that you'll attend to me."

Anne looked up from her seat at the table's head, wondering what was coming. She wore an evening dress of black crape, a jet necklace on her fair neck, jet bracelets on her arms: mourning far deeper than the Dowager's.

"Do you listen to me, Val?"

"I am quite ready, madam," answered Val.

"I asked you, once before, to let me have Maude's children, and to allow me a fair income with them. Had you done so, this dreadful misfortune would not have overtaken your house: for it stands to reason that if Lord Elster had been living somewhere else with me, he could not have caught the scarlet fever in London."

"We never thought he did catch it," returned the earl. "It was not prevailing at the time; and, strange to say, none of the other children took it, or any one else in the house."

"Then what gave it him?" sharply uttered the Dowager.

What the earl answered was spoken in a low tone, and she caught one word only, Providence. She gave a grunt, and continued.

"At any rate, he's gone; and you have now no pretext for refusing me Maude. I shall take her, and bring her up, and you must allow me liberally for her."

"I shall not part with Maude," said the earl, in a quiet tone of decision.

"You can't decently refuse her to me, I say," rejoined the Dowager, nodding her head somewhat defiantly: "she's my own grandchild."

"And my child. The argument on this point years ago was unsatisfactory, Lady Kirton; I do not feel disposed to renew it. Maude will remain in her own home."

"You are a vile man, Lord Hartledon!" cried the Dowager, with an inflamed face. "Pass me the wine, will you?"

He filled her glass, and left the decanter with her. She drank some, and resumed.

"One day, when I was with Maude, your wife, in that last illness of hers in London, when we couldn't find out what was the matter with her, poor dear, she wrote you a letter; and I know what was in it, for I read it. You had gone dancing off somewhere for a week."

"To the Isle of Wight, for you," put in the earl quietly; "on that unhappy business connected with your son who lives there. Well, madam?"

"In that letter Maude said she wished me to have the charge of her children, if she died; and she begged you to take notice that she said it," continued the Dowager, finishing her glass. "Now then, Hart! Perhaps you'll say you never had that letter?"

"On the contrary, madam, I admit that I received the letter," he replied. "I daresay I have it still. Most of Maude's letters lie in my desk undisturbed."

"And, admitting that, you refuse to act up to it?"

"Maude wrote that letter to me in a moment of pique, when she was angry with me. But ——"

"And I have no doubt she had cause for being angry with you!" came the interrupting retort.

"She had; great cause," was his answer, spoken with a strange sadness that surprised both the Dowager and Lady Hartledon. Thomas Carr was twirling his wine-glass gently round on the white cloth by its stem, neither speaking nor looking.

"Later, my wife fully retracted to me what she said in that letter," continued the earl. "She confessed to me that she had written it partly at your dictation, Lady Kirton, and she said —— but I had better not tell you that, perhaps."

"Then you shall tell it me, Lord Hartledon; and you are a false, two-faced man, if you shuffle out of it."

"Very well. Maude said that she would not for the whole world allow her children to be brought up by you; she warned me also not to allow you to obtain too much influence over them."

"It's false!" said the Dowager, helping herself to some more wine, no whit disconcerted.

"It is perfectly true: and Maude told me you knew what her sentiments were upon the point. Her real and final wish, as expressed to me, was, that the children should remain with me in any case, in their proper home."

"You say you have that other letter still?" cried the Dowager, who was not always very perspicuous in her conversation.

"No doubt."

"Then perhaps you'll look for it: and read over her wishes in black and white."

"No: certainly not. To what end? It would make

no difference in my decision. I tell you, ma'am, I am consulting Maude's wishes in keeping her child at home."

"I know better," retorted the Dowager, completely losing her temper. "I wish your poor dear wife could rise from her grave and confute you. It's all stinginess; because you won't part with a paltry bit of money."

"No," said the earl, "it's because I won't part with my child. Understand me, Lady Kirton — had Maude's wishes even been with you in this, I should not carry them out. As to money — I may have something to say to you on that score; but suppose we postpone it to a more fitting opportunity."

"You'd not carry them out!" she cried, with blazing eyes. "But you might be forced to, you mean Val! That letter of Maude's may be as good as a will in the eyes of the law. You daren't produce it; that's what it is."

"I'll give it you with pleasure," said the earl, with a smile. "That is, if I have kept it. I am not sure."

She drank down another glass of wine, and caught up her fan, and sat fanning herself. The reservation "if I have kept it" had struck with a sound never intended on her crafty ear: that her rebellious son-in-law meant to destroy the letter, she felt sure; and she began wondering how she could outwit him.

A sudden noise and a sharp cry outside the door interrupted them. The children were only coming into dessert now; and Reginald, taking a flying leap down the stairs, took rather too long a one, and came to grief at the bottom. Truth to say, the young gentleman, no longer kept down by poor Edward, was getting high-spirited and venturesome.

"What's that?" asked Anne, as the nurse came in with them, scolding.

"Lord Elster fell down, my lady. He's getting as tiresome as can be. Only to-day, I caught his lordship astride on the kitchen banisters, going to slide down them."

"O, Regy," said his mother, holding up her reproving finger.

The boy laughed, and came forward rubbing his arm bravely, and ashamed of his tears. Val caught him up and kissed them away, drawing Maude also to his side. And the Countess Dowager fanned herself fiercely: those marks of distinction — the titles — when applied to Anne's child, were as very wormwood. She thought heaven had been cruel, not to have taken this one and spared the other.

That letter! She was as determined to get it as any woman could be, if there were a possibility under the sun. A suspicion or instinct had arisen within her — it may be said a prevision — that she had made herself too hot for Lady Hartledon's house, and would not much longer be tolerated in it. But she knew not where to go. Kirton, vile man, had married again; and his new wife had fairly turned her out more unceremoniously than the late one did. By hook or by crook, she meant to obtain the guardianship of her grand-daughter, because in allowing her Maude, Lord Hartledon would have to allow her an income.

She was a woman to stop at nothing; she had not taught her daughter, poor Maude, to stop at much; and upon quitting the dining-room, she betook herself to the library — a large, beautiful room — the pride

of Hartledon. She had come in search of the earl's desk; which she found, and proceeded to devise means of opening. That being accomplished, she sat herself down, like a leisurely housebreaker, to examine it, putting on a pair of spectacles, which she kept surreptitiously in a pocket, and would not have worn before any body for the world. She found the letter she was in search of; and she found something else for her pains, which she had not bargained for.

Not just at first. There were many tempting odds and ends of things which she dipped into. For one thing, she found Val's banking book, and some old cheque-books; they served her for a good while. Next, she came upon two packets of letters, sealed up in white paper, with Val's own seal. On one was written "Letters of Lady Maude;" on the other "Letters of my dear Anne." There was a distinction in the superscription which aroused her bile, and an opinion, audibly expressed, that Hart deserved a sound shaking. Peering further into the desk, she came upon an obscure small inner slide, which had evidently not been opened for years, and she had difficulty in undoing it. A paper was in it, superscribed "Concerning A. W.;" on opening which, she found a letter addressed to Thomas Carr, of the Temple.

Thomas Carr's letters were no more sacred with her than Lord Hartledon's. No woman living was troubled with scruples so little as the one at the desk. It proved to have been written by a Dr. Mair, in Scotland, and was dated several years back.

But now — did Lord Hartledon really know he had that dangerous letter by him? If so, what could have

possessed him to preserve it? Or, did he not rather believe he had returned it to Mr. Carr at the time? The latter, indeed, proved to be the case; and never, to the end of his life, would he, in one sense, forgive his own carelessness.

Who was A. W.? thought the curious old woman, as she drew the light nearer to her, and began the tempting perusal, making her most of the little time left. They could not be at tea yet, and she had told Lady Hartledon she was going to take her nap in her own room. The gratification of rummaging false Val's desk was an ample compensation for the after-dinner sleep; and the Countess Dowager hugged herself with delight. She had not enjoyed such a treat this many a day.

But what was it that she had come upon — this paper "concerning A. W."? The Dowager's mouth fell as she read; and gradually her little eyes opened as if they had a mind to start from their sockets, and her face grew white, though her nose was scarlet with the dinner, and her cheeks with their false carmine. Have you ever watched the livid pallor of fear struggle to one of these painted faces? The sight is not pleasant. She dashed off her spectacles; she got up and wrung her hands; she executed a frantic war-dance, never so frantic a one as this, to the imminent danger of the floor, and whoever might be underneath it; and finally she tore, shrieking, with the letter, into the drawing-room, where the earl and countess and Thomas Carr were beginning tea and talking quietly.

They rose from their seats in consternation; they thought she must have set fire to herself; she danced

in and about them, shrieking awfully, and at length held out the letter to the earl.

He took it from her, gazing at it in utter bewilderment as he gathered-in its contents. Was it a fresh letter, or — his face became whiter than the Dowager's. In her storm of reckless passion she avowed what she had done — that the letter was secreted in his desk.

"Madam! have you dared to visit my desk?" he gasped — "to break my seals? Are you mad?"

"Hark at him!" she exclaimed, nearly upsetting Mr. Carr as she danced against him. "He calls me to account for just lifting the lid of a desk! But what is he? A villain — a thief — a spy — a murderer — and worse than any of them! Ah, ha, my lady!" nodding her false front at Lady Hartledon, who stood like one petrified, "you stare there at me with your open eyes, bold as brass; but you don't know what you are! Ask *him*! What was Maude — Heaven help her — my poor Maude? What was she? And *you* in the plot; you, Carr! I'll have you all hanged together!"

Lord Hartledon caught his wife's hand.

"Carr, do you stay here with her and tell her all. No good concealing any thing, now she has read this letter. Tell her for me. If I attempt it, she'll most likely scratch and bite me, and I might have to tie her hands down."

He drew his wife into the adjoining room, the one where the portrait of George Elster looked down on its guests. The time of imparting the story to his wife had been somewhat forestalled. He had given half his life that it had never reached that other woman, miserable old sinner though she was.

"You are trembling, Anne; you need not. It is not against you that I have sinned."

Yes, she was trembling very much. And the earl, in his honourable, his refined, his shrinking nature, would have given his life's other half not to have had the tale to tell.

It is not a pleasant one. You can skip it if you like, and go on to the last page of the book. The earl once said he had been more sinned against than sinning: it may be deemed that in that opinion he was over-lenient to himself. Anne, his wife, listened with averted face and disbelieving ears.

"You have wanted a solution to my conduct, Anne — to the strange preference I seemed to accord to the poor boy who is gone; why I could not punish him; why I was more thankful for the boon of his death than I had been for his life. He was my child, but he was not Lord Elster."

She did not understand.

"He had no right to my name; poor little Maude has no right to it. Do you take me now?"

Not at all; it was as though he were talking Greek to her.

"Their mother, when they were born, was not my wife."

"Their mother was Lady Maude Kirton," she rejoined, in her bewilderment.

"That is exactly where it was," he answered bitterly; "Lady Maude Kirton, not Countess of Hartledon."

She could not comprehend the words; her mind

was a chaos, full of consternation and tumult. Back went her thoughts to the past.

"O Val! I remember papa's saying that a marriage in that unused chapel, where road-boys had played and rubbish had collected, was only three parts legal!"

"It was legal enough, Anne; legal enough. But when that ceremony took place" — his voice dropped to a miserable whisper, "I had — as they tell me — a wife living."

Slowly she admitted the meaning of the words: and would have started from him with a faint cry, but that he held her back.

"Listen to the whole, Anne, before you judge me. What has been your promise to me, over and over again? — that, if I would tell you my sorrow, *you'd* never shrink from me, whatever it might be."

She remembered it, and stood still; terribly rebellious, clasping her fingers to pain, one within the other.

"In that respect, at any rate, I did not willingly sin. When I married Maude, I had no suspicion that I was not free as air; free to marry her, or any other woman in the world."

"You speak in enigmas," she said faintly.

"Sit you down there, Anne, while I give you the substance of the tale. Not its details until I am more myself, and those cries" — pointing to the next room — "are not sounding in my ears. You shall hear all later; at least, as much as I know; I have never quite believed in it, and it has been to me throughout as a horrid dream."

Indeed Mr. Carr seemed to be having no inconsiderable amount of trouble, to judge by the clatter, and the explosion of wrath in the Dowager's voice.

She sat down as he told her, her face turned from him, rebellious at having to listen, but curious yet. Lord Hartledon stood by the mantel-piece and shaded his eyes with his hand.

"Cast your thoughts back, Anne; you may remember that an accident happened to me in Scotland. It was before you and I were engaged, or it would not have happened. Or, let me say, it might not; for young men are reckless, and I was no better than others. Heaven have mercy on their follies!"

"The accident might not have happened?"

"I do not speak of the accident. I mean what followed. When out shooting, I nearly blew off my arm. I was carried to the nearest medical man's, a Dr. Mair's, and remained there; for it was not thought safe to move me; they feared inflammation, and they feared lock-jaw. My father was written to, and came; and when he left, after the danger was over, he made arrangements with Dr. Mair to keep me on, for he was a skilful man, and wished to perfect the cure. I thought the prolonged stay in the strange, quiet house worse than all the rest. That feeling wore off; we get reconciled to most conditions; and things grew more tolerable as I grew better and joined the household. There was a wild, clever, random young man staying there, the doctor's assistant — George Gordon; and there was also a young lady, Agnes Waterlow. I used to wonder what this Agnes did there, and one day asked the old housekeeper; she said the young

lady was there partly that the doctor might watch her health, partly because she was a relative of his late wife's, and had no home."

He paused, as if in thought, but soon continued.

"We got very intimate; I, Gordon, and Miss Waterlow. Neither of them was the person I should have chosen for an intimacy; but there was, in a sense, no help for it, living together. Agnes was a wild, free, rather coarse-natured girl, and Gordon drank. That she fell in love with me there's no doubt — and I grew to like her in a degree; quite well enough to talk nonsense to her. Whether any plot was laid between her and Gordon to entrap me, or whether what happened arose in the recklessness of the moment, I cannot decide to this hour. It was on my twenty-first birthday; I was nearly well then; we had what the doctor called a dinner, Gordon a jollification, and Agnes a supper. It was late when we sat down to it, eight o'clock; and there was a good deal of feasting and plenty of wine. The doctor was called out afterwards to a patient several miles distant, and Geordie Gordon made some punch; which rendered none of our heads the steadier. At least I can answer for mine; I was weak with the long illness, and not much of a drinker at any time. There was a great deal of nonsense going on, and Gordon pretended to marry me to Agnes. He said or read (I can't tell which, and never knew then) some words mockingly out of the prayer-book, and said we were man and wife. While we were all laughing at the joke, the doctor's old housekeeper came in, to see what the noise was about, and I, by way of keeping it up, took Agnes by the hand, and introduced her as Mrs. Elster. I

did not understand the woman's look of astonishment then; unfortunately I have understood it too well since."

Anne was growing painfully interested.

"Well, after that she threw herself upon me in a manner that — that was extraordinary to me, not having the key to it; and I — lost my head. Don't frown, Anne; ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have lost theirs; and you'll say so, if ever I give you the details. Of course blame attached to me; to me, and not to her. Though at the time I mentally gave her, I assure you, her full share, somewhat after the manner of the immaculate Pharisee condemning the publican. That also has come home to me: she believed herself to be legally my wife; I never cast a thought back upon that evening's farce, and should have supposed its bearing any meaning a simple impossibility.

"A short while, and letters summoned me home; my mother was dangerously ill. I remember Agnes asked me to take her with me, and I laughed at her. I arranged to write to her, and promised to go back shortly — which, to tell you the truth, I never meant to do. Having been mistaking her, mistaking her still, I really thought her worth very little consideration. Before I had been at home a fortnight, I received a letter from Dr. Mair, telling me that Agnes was showing symptoms of insanity, and asking what provision I purposed making for her. My sin was finding me out: I wondered how *he* had found it out; I did not ask, and did not know for years. I wrote back, saying I would willingly take all expenses upon myself;

and inquired what sum would be required by the asylum — to which he said she must be sent. He mentioned two hundred a-year, and from that time I paid it regularly.”

“And was she really insane?” interrupted Lady Hartledon.

“Yes; she had been so once or twice before — and this was what the housekeeper had meant by saying she was with the doctor that her health might be watched. It appeared that when these symptoms came on, after I left, Gordon took upon himself to disclose to the doctor that Agnes was married to me, telling the circumstances as they had occurred. Dr. Mair got frightened: it was no light matter for the son of a peer of England to have been deluded into a marriage with an obscure and insane girl; and the quarrel that took place between him and Gordon on the occasion resulted in the latter's leaving. I have never understood Gordon's conduct in the matter: very disagreeable thoughts in regard to it come over me sometimes.”

“What thoughts?”

“O, never mind; they can never be set at rest now. Let me make short work of this story. I heard no more and thought no more; and the years went on, and then came my marriage with Maude. We went to Paris — *you* cannot have forgotten any of the details of that period, Anne; and after our return to London I was surprised by a visit from Dr. Mair. That evening, that visit and its details, stamped themselves on my memory for ever in characters of living fire.”

He paused for a moment, and something like a shiver took him. Anne said nothing.

"Maude had gone with some friends to a fête at Chiswick, and Thomas Carr was dining with me. Hedges came in and said a gentleman wanted to see me—*would* see me, and would not be denied. I went to him, and found it was Dr. Mair. In that interview I learnt that by the laws of Scotland Miss Waterlow was my wife."

"And the suspicion that she was so had never occurred to you before?"

"Anne! Should I have been capable of marrying Maude, or any one else, if it had? On my solemn word of honour, before heaven" — he raised his right hand as if to give effect to his words — "such a thought had never crossed my brain. The evening that the nonsense took place, I only regarded it as a jest, a pastime — what you will: had any one told me it was a marriage, I should have laughed at them. I knew nothing then of the laws of Scotland, and should have thought it just impossible that that minute's folly, and my calling her, to keep up the joke, Mrs. Elster, could have constituted a marriage. I think they all played a deep part, even Agnes. Not a soul had so much as hinted at the word 'marriage' to me after that evening; neither Gordon, nor she, nor Dr. Mair in his subsequent correspondence; and in that he always called her 'Agnes.' However — he then told me that she was certainly my legal wife, and that Lady Maude was not.

"At first," continued the earl, "I did not believe it; but Dr. Mair persisted he was right, and the horror of the situation grew upon me. I told all to Carr, and

took him up to Dr. Mair. They discussed Scottish law and consulted law-books; and the truth, so far, became apparent. Dr. Mair was sorry for me; he saw I had not erred knowingly in marrying Maude: as to myself, I was helpless, prostrated; a very worm, abject on the ground. I asked the doctor, if it was really true, why the fact had been kept from me: he replied that he supposed I knew it, and that delicacy alone had caused him to abstain from alluding to it in his letters. He had been very angry when Gordon told him, he said; grew half frightened for consequences; feared he should get into trouble for allowing me to be so entrapped in his house; and he and Gordon parted at once. And then Dr. Mair asked a question which I could not very well answer, why, if I did not know she was my wife, had I paid so large a sum for Agnes. He had been burying the affair in silence, as he had assumed I was doing; and it was only the announcement of my marriage with Maude in the newspapers that aroused him. He had thought I was acting this bad part wilfully, knowingly; and he went off at once to Hartledon in anger; found I had gone abroad; and now came to me on my return, still in anger, saying at first that he should proceed against me, and obtain justice for Agnes. When he found how utterly ignorant of wrong I had been, then his tone changed; he was truly sorry for me, and was, I believe, nearly as grieved as I was. Nothing was decided: except that Dr. Mair, in his compassion to Lady Maude, promised not to be the first to take steps. It seemed that there was only him to fear: George Gordon was reported to have gone to Australia; the old housekeeper was dead; Agnes was deranged. Dr. Mair

left, and Carr and I sat on till midnight. Carr took what I called a harsh view of the thing; he urged me to separate from Maude —”

“I think you should have done so for her sake,” came the gentle interruption.

“For her sake! the words Carr used. But, Anne, surely there were two sides to the question. If I disclosed the facts, and put her away from me, what was she? And she was already expecting her child, — him we have just buried. Besides, the law might be against me, — Scotland’s iniquitous law; but in Heaven’s sight *Maude* was my wife, not the other. So I temporised, hoping that time might bring about a relief, for Dr. Mair told me that Miss Waterlow’s health was failing. However, she lived on, and —”

Lady Hartledon started up, her face blanching.

“Is she not dead now? Was she alive when you married me? Am I your wife?”

He could hardly help smiling. His calm touch on her shoulder cooled the fever.

“Do you think you need ask it, Anne? The next year Dr. Mair called upon me again, — it was the evening before the boy was christened; he had come to London on business of his own. To my dismay, he told me that a change for the better was appearing in Miss Waterlow’s mental condition; and he thought it likely she might be restored to sanity. Of course it increased the perplexities and my horror, had that been needed; but the hope or fear, or what you like to call it, was not borne out. Three years later the doctor came to me for the third and final time, to bring me the news that Agnes was dead.”

As the relief had been to him then, so did it almost seem now to Lady Hartledon. A sigh of pent-up pain, irrepressible, broke from her. She had not seen where all this was tending.

"Imagine, if you can, what it was for me all those years; with the knowledge daily and nightly upon me that the disgraceful truth might at any moment come out to Maude, — to her children, to the world! Living in the dread of arrest myself, should the man Gordon show himself on the scene! And now you see what it is that has marred my peace, and broken the otherwise happiness of our married life. How could I bear to cross those two deeply-injured children, who were ever rising up in judgment before me? How take our children's part against them, little unconscious things? It seemed that I had always, daily, hourly, some wrong to make up to them. The poor boy was heir to Hartledon in the eyes of the world; but, Anne, it was your boy who was the true heir to Hartledon."

"Why did you not tell me? — all this while!"

"I could not. I dared not. You might not have liked for Reginald to be put out of his rights."

"O Percival; how can you so misjudge me?" she asked in a tone of pain. "I would have guarded the secret as jealously as you. I must still do it for Maude."

"Poor Maude! poor child!" he sighed. "Her mother forgave me before she died. She —"

"She knew it, then?"

"Yes. She —"

Violent sounds as of drumming and kicking on the door, and shouts for him in the Countess Dowager's voice, stopped the earl.

"I had better face her," he said, as he unlocked it. "She'll arouse the household."

Wild, frantic, intemperate, she met him with a volley of abuse that startled Lady Hartledon. He got her to a sofa, and gently held her down there.

"It's what I've been obliged to do all along," said Thomas Carr; "but she broke loose at last. Hartledon, I don't believe she has heard ten words of my explanation; she was too violent to listen."

"Pray be calm, Lady Kirton," said the earl soothingly; "be calm, as you value your daughter's memory. We shall have the servants at the key-holes."

"I won't be calm; I will know the worst."

"I wish you to know it; but not others."

"Was Maude your wife?"

"No," he answered in a low tone. "Not —"

"And are you not ashamed to confess it?" she interrupted, not allowing him to continue. But she was a little calmer in manner; and the earl stood upright before her with folded arms.

"I am ashamed and grieved to confess it; but I did not knowingly inflict the injury. In Scotland —"

"Don't repeat the shameful tale," she cried; "I have heard from your confederate, Carr, as much as I want to hear of it. What do you deserve for your treachery to Maude?"

"All I have reaped — and more. But it was not intentional treachery; and Maude forgave me before she died."

"She knew it! You told her? O, you cruel animal!"

"I did not tell her," replied the earl, patiently

bearing with the Dowager: "she did as you have just done — interfered in what did not concern her, in direct disobedience to my desire; and she found it out for herself, as you, madam, have found it out."

"When?"

"The winter previous to her death."

"Then the knowledge killed her!"

"No. Something else killed her, as you know. It preyed upon her spirits."

The Dowager rubbed her hot face, totally forgetting the carmine; and her cheeks grew into stripes, like a tiger's coat.

"Lord Hartledon, I can pull you up for fraud and forgery, and I'll do it. It will be the consideration of Maude's fame against your punishment, and I'll make a sacrifice to revenge, and prosecute you. I shall have all society condoling with me for Maude's wrongs, from the queen upon her throne."

"There is no fraud where an offence is committed unwittingly," returned Lord Hartledon; "and forgery is certainly not among my catalogue of sins."

"You are liable for both," sullenly retorted the Dowager; "you have stuck up 'Maude, Countess of Hartledon,' on her monument, hard by here, in the church; and what's that but fraud and forgery?"

"It is neither," was the earl's reply. "If Maude did not live Countess of Hartledon, she at least went to her grave as such. We were re-married, privately, before she died. Mr. Carr can tell you so."

"It's false!" raved the Dowager.

"I arranged it, madam," interposed Mr. Carr. "Lord Hartledon and your daughter confided the management

to me, and the ceremony was performed in secrecy in London."

The Dowager looked from one to the other; her eyes rolling, as if she were bewildered.

"Married her again! why, that was making bad worse. Two false marriages! Did you do it to impose upon her?"

"I see you do not understand," said Lord Hartledon. "The — my — the person in Scotland was dead then. She was dead, I am thankful to say, before Maude knew any thing of the affair."

Up started the Dowager, all fire. "Then is the woman dead now? was she dead when you married *her*, Miss Ashton?" laying her hand upon Lady Hartledon's arm, and shaking it. "Are her children different from Maude's — born legally?"

"They are. It could not be otherwise."

"Her boy has really become Lord Elster?"

"He was born so."

She flung Lady Hartledon's arm from her, to recommence her dance; but Thomas Carr hemmed her in. Her voice rose into a shriek.

"The child, Maude, is not Lady Maude?"

The earl shook his head sadly.

"And your children are lords and ladies and honourables," she said, darting a look of consternation at the countess, "while my daughter's —"

"Peace, Lady Kirton!" sternly interrupted the earl. "Let the child, Maude, be Lady Maude still to the world; let your daughter's memory be unspersed and unsuspected. The facts need never come out: I do not fear now that they ever will. I, and my wife,

and Thomas Carr, will guard the secret safely: take you care to do so."

"I wish you had been hung before you had married Maude!" responded the aggrieved Dowager.

"I wish I had," said he.

"Ugh!" she grunted wrathfully, the ready assent not pleasing her.

"With my poor boy's death the chief difficulty has passed away," resumed Lord Hartledon. "How things would have turned out, or what would have been done, had he lived, it has well-nigh worn away my brain to dwell upon. Carr knows that it has nearly killed me: my wife knows it."

"Yes, you could tell her things, and keep the diabolical secret from poor Maude and from me," she returned, rather inconsistently. "I don't doubt you and your wife have exulted enough over it. Her son Lord Elster from the first!"

"I never knew it until this night," said Lady Hartledon, gently turning to the Dowager. "It has grieved me deeply. I shall never cease to feel for your daughter's wrongs; and it will only make me more tender and loving to her child. The world will never know that she is not Lady Maude."

"Add the other name — Elster — because you know she has no right to it," was the spiteful retort. "I wish to my heart you had been drowned in your brother's place, Lord Hartledon; I wished it at the time."

"I know you did."

"You could not then have made fools of me and my dear daughter; and the darling little cherub in the churchyard would have been the real heir. I wish

you had been! There'd have been a good riddance of you."

"It might have been better for me in the long-run," said he quietly, passing over the inconsistencies of her speech. "Little peace or happiness have I had in living. Do not let us recriminate, Lady Kirton, or on some scores I might reproach you. Maude loved my brother, and you knew it; I loved Miss Ashton, and you knew that: yet from the very hour the breath was out of my brother's body, you laid your plans and began your schemes upon me."

"Hark at him!" interrupted the Dowager, appealing to Mr. Carr, for want of somebody else to appeal to. "Can't he invent!"

"I was weak as water in your hands, and fell into the snare," he calmly went on. "The marriage was your work entirely; and in the fruits it has brought forth there might arise a nice question, Lady Kirton, which of us is the most to blame: I, who erred unwittingly, or you who —"

"Will you have done?" she cried out; "you'd talk a saint's tongue out of him!"

"I have nearly done. I only wish you to remember that others may have been wrong, as well as myself. Dr. Ashton warned us that night that the marriage might not bring a blessing. — Anne, it was a cruel wrong upon you," he added, impulsively turning to her; "you felt it bitterly, I shamefully; but, my dear wife, you have lived to see the wrong was only in semblance; that it was in reality a mercy in disguise."

The Countess Dowager, not finding words strong enough to express her feelings at this, made a face at him.

"Let us be friends, Lady Kirton! Let us join together silently in guarding Maude's good name, and in burying the past. In time perhaps even I may live it down. Not a human being knows of it save us who are here and Dr. Mair, who will for his own sake guard the secret. Maude was my wife always in the eyes of the world; and Maude certainly died so: all peace and respect to her memory! As for my share, retribution has held its heavy hand upon me; it is upon me still, Heaven knows. It was for Maude I suffered; for Maude I felt; and if my life could have repaired the wrong upon her, I'd willingly have sacrificed it. Let us be friends: it may be to the interest of both of us."

He held out his hand, and the Dowager gave a sniff, and did not repulse it. She had caught the word "interest."

"*Now* you might allow me Maude and that income!"

"I think I had better allow you the income without Maude."

"Eh? what?" said the Dowager briskly. "Do you mean it?"

"Indeed I do. I have been thinking for some little time that you would be more comfortable in a home of your own, and I am willing to help you to one. I'll pay the rent of a nice little place in Ireland, and give you six hundred a-year, paid quarterly, and — yes — make you a present yearly of ten dozen of port wine."

Ah, the crafty man! The last item had a golden sound. Before the earl was aware, she had caught hold of his face and kissed it with a loud noise.

"Honour bright, Hartledon?"

"Honour bright. You shall never want for any thing as long as you live. But you must not" — the earl seemed to search for his words — "you must undertake not to come here, upsetting and indulging the children."

"I'll undertake it. Good wine, mind."

"The same that you drink here."

The Countess Dowager smacked her lips. In the midst of her happiness — and it was what she had not felt for many a long day, for really the poor old creature had been put about sadly — she bethought herself of propriety. Melting into tears and sobs, which made her face more stripy than before, she presently bewailed her exhaustion, and said she should like some tea: perhaps good Mr. Carr would go to the sideboard in the dining-room and get her a teaspoonful of brandy to put in it.

They got her hot tea, and Mr. Carr put the brandy in it, and Anne took it to her on the sofa, and administered it lovingly, her tears falling. She was thinking what an awful blow this would have been to her own mother.

"Little Maude shall be very dear to me always, Val," she whispered, looking up to her husband's face through her tears. "This knowledge will make me doubly tender with her."

He laid his hand fondly on her bright hair, giving her one of his sweet sad smiles in answer. She could at length understand what feelings, in regard to the children, had actuated him. But from henceforth he would be just to all alike; and Maude would get her share of correction for her own good.

"I always said you did not give me back the letter," observed Mr. Carr to the earl, as they were alone together later; and Val sat tearing up the letter into innumerable bits.

"And I said I did, simply because I could not find it. You were right, Carr, as you always are."

"Not always. But I am sorry it came to light in this way."

"Sorry!" echoed the earl; "it is the greatest boon that could have fallen on me. The secret is, so to say, off my mind now, and I can breathe as I have not breathed for years. If ever a heartfelt thanksgiving went up to Heaven, one from me will ascend to-night. And the Dowager does not feel the past a bit. She cared no more really for Maude than for any body else. She can't care for any body. Don't think me harsh, Carr, in saying so."

"I am sure she does not feel it," emphatically assented Mr. Carr. "Had she felt it, she'd not have ranted so. Thank Heaven for your sake, Hartledon, that the miserable past is over."

"And over better than I deserved."

There ensued a silence, and Lord Hartledon flung the bits of paper carefully into the fire. Presently he looked up, a strange earnestness in his face.

"It is the custom of some of our cottagers here to hang up embossed cards at their bed's foot, with texts of Scripture written on them. There's one verse I should like to hang before every son of mine, though I had ten of them, that it might meet their eyes always, last ere the evening's sleeping, in the morning's

first awaking. The ninth verse of the eleventh chapter of Ecclesiastes."

"I don't remember which that is," observed Thomas Carr, after a pause of thought.

"Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment."

NOTE.

I wish to state that the leading incidents in the preceding pages took place in a noble family some few years ago. I have but related the story, not imagined it. It has not been a very pleasant story to write of; it was still less so to encounter, and conceal. Also I must beg the reader, for obvious reasons, to observe, that the substance of it first appeared in *Colburn's New Monthly Magazine* in 1858.

E. W.

London, June 1866.

THE END.

PRINTING OFFICE OF THE PUBLISHER.

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FROM THE FIRST SETTLEMENT
TO THE PRESENT TIME
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VOLUME I
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London, 1812

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Wood, Henry

Elster's Folly a novel

Bd.: 2

Leipzig (1866)

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